



P4 Farmers give in to lure of profits



P6 2023 was year of hypocrisy, rights suppression: HRW



P10 City look to amp up title race



WR1 Tanguar Haor: A Paradise Lost

Gas crisis leaves households, industry on edge

Situation unlikely to improve anytime soon for dollar crunch

ASIFUR RAHMAN and SHAHEEN MOLLAH

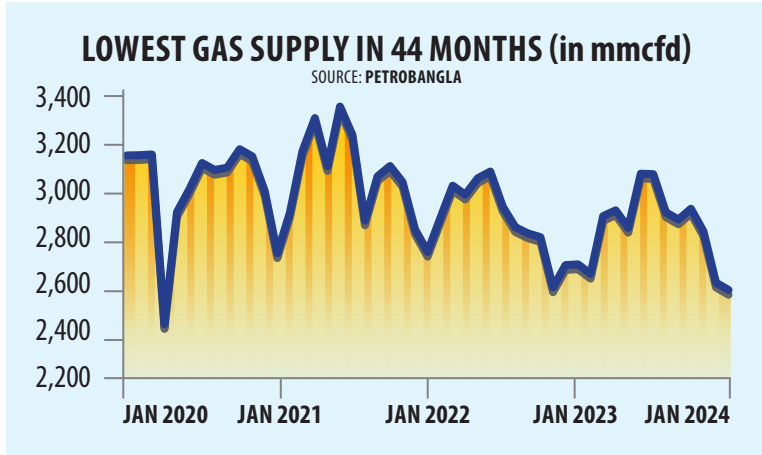
The gas supply now is the lowest since April 2020, shows data from Petrobangla -- in a development that informs the acute crisis plaguing the industrial sector as well as households.

At present, the gas supply is about 2,500 million standard cubic feet per day (mmcf) against the demand of 3,800 mmcf.

This is lower than in the last quarter of 2021, when the government suspended the purchase of liquefied natural gas from the international spot market following record-high prices and a dollar crunch.

With the onset of winter, the power sector's demand for gas has subsided, but that does not mean the other sectors are getting more gas because of a drop in local production and fewer imports, according to Petrobangla officials informed with the proceedings.

The situation is unlikely to see a drastic improvement anytime soon:



the supply will only increase in the latter half of February, but then the demand will also tick up.

For now, patience of both households and industries is wearing thin over the constricted gas supply.

Take the case of Total Fashion, an export-oriented textile manufacturer in Narayanganj. The factory gets adequate gas supply only on Fridays, according to its officials.

"We don't get gas on the other days of the week, so our production has dropped dramatically. We need gas to keep our boilers running for dyeing and printing fabrics," said one of the officials asking not to be named as he is not authorised to speak with the media.

BSRM Group, the country's leading steel manufacturer, saw its production costs balloon for the gas shortage as they are meeting the fuel demand with diesel, said Tapan Sengupta, its deputy managing director.

The production cost per tonne of rod has increased by Tk 1,000-1,200. "For now, we are absorbing the higher production cost. But if it continues this way, we will have to hike the prices," he added.

The ceramics industry is particularly suffering from the inadequate gas supply.

"We need a minimum 10 psi (Pounds per square inch) gas pressure, but during the daytime, the pressure is between two to four psi," said Irfan Uddin, managing director of FARR Ceramics, whose factory is located in the Bhabanipur area of Gazipur.

As a result, the quality of products is deteriorating. The inadequate gas pressure means the factory has to halt production for hours on end, which adds to the production costs.

"If the pressure drops when we are in the middle of production, the entire batch is ruined. We have to count losses for all the raw materials that went into that batch," he added.

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PM, ministers pay tributes to Bangabandhu, 1971 martyrs

STAR REPORT

Hours after taking her oath of office, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday morning paid homage to Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the martyrs of the Liberation War.

She first paid tributes to Bangabandhu by placing a wreath at his portrait in front of the Bangabandhu Bhaban in Dhaka's Dhanmondi around 10:00am, report BSS and UNB.

The PM along with the members of the council of ministers then placed another wreath at Bangabandhu's portrait and stood there in solemn silence for a while to show respect to the architect of independent Bangladesh.

Hasina's younger sister Sheikh Rehana was present.

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Flanked by members of the council of ministers, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina stands in solemn silence after placing wreaths at the National Memorial in Savar. They visited the memorial yesterday, a day after taking their oath of office, to pay homage to the martyrs of the Liberation War.

PHOTO: BSS



Vegetables brought from nearby villages are being unloaded from boats in Sylhet's Kanaighat Char Bazar on Wednesday. Growers sold each 100 cauliflowers for Tk 4,000 to Tk 6,000, depending on the size. Prices of winter vegetables remain relatively high in the kitchen markets for what traders say is a supply dearth owing to reduced production. Story on page 12

PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

37-MEMBER COUNCIL OF MINISTERS Nearly half of them businesspeople

BAHARAM KHAN and ASHIK ABDULLAH APU

Businesspeople continue to dominate the council of ministers as almost half of its new members are involved in business, according to their affidavits submitted to the Election Commission.

As many as 16 of the 37 members of the new council of ministers are businesspeople. Seven of them mentioned farming as their other profession.

Five other ministers and a state minister are lawyers while two ministers and a state minister are farmers.

In the previous council of ministers, 22 of the 48 members owned businesses while in the council formed in 2014, 21 of the 57 were businesspeople.

Iftexharuzzaman, executive director of Transparency International Bangladesh, said, "Implications of business dominance is much more than their sheer number in the cabinet; it is their individual and collective business interests backed by the enormous lobby power of the 65 percent of the members of parliament."

Their overwhelming collective leverage in a monopolised political and

governance space with near absence of checks and balances, especially where state institutions of accountability are deeply politicised and nearly dysfunctional, bears the obvious risk of government decisions being driven more by business interest than that of the common people, he told The Daily Star.

"The only hope, which may turn out to be wishful thinking, is that some of those who matter may from time to time consider rising above parochialism and exercise the monopolistic power with some degree of benevolence," he added.

The new council members who mentioned business as their occupation are Tazul Islam, minister for local government and rural development; Hasan Mahmud, minister for foreign affairs; Ahsanul Islam Titu, state minister for commerce; Abdur Rahman, minister for fisheries and livestock; Abdus Salam, minister for planning; Shafiqur Rahman Chowdhury, state minister for expatriates' welfare; Zillul Hakim, minister for railway; Simeen Hussain Rimi, state minister for women and children affairs; and Mohibur Rahman, state minister for disaster management and relief.

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Housing minister sues polls rival for defamation

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Brahmanbaria

Newly appointed Housing and Public Works Minister RAM Obaidul Mukhtar Chowdhury has filed a Tk 100 crore defamation suit against Firozur Rahman Olio, who was his rival in the January 7 polls in Brahmanbaria 3.

The case was filed with a Brahmanbaria court on Thursday afternoon, Mukhtar's lawyer Abdul Jabbar Mamun said.

After taking the case into cognisance, Joint District Judge Nazrul Islam fixed January 14 for hearing, the lawyer told The Daily Star.

He said Firozur during campaigning on December 26 claimed he helped Mukhtar with Tk 50,000 about 30 to 35 years ago and also donated money to a local private university where Mukhtar is the chairman of the trustee board.

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No chance for outsiders Says BCB boss about his successor

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Nazmul Hassan Papon indicated a willingness to cut short his tenure as Bangladesh Cricket Board president after he was handed responsibility of the Ministry of Youth and Sports on Thursday.

Speaking to the media yesterday, Hassan informed that in case he resigns as BCB president, only current members of the BCB board of directors can be elected as a new president.

However, chances remain slim of the BCB president being able to resign before his term officially ends in October 2025. The present scenario is not very clear.

One BCB top official asked this reporter whether the BCB president was actually saying he wanted to resign or did he say something while talking about the process of electing a new president.

It would mean that the incumbent board may not be thinking too far

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Israeli strikes kill 151 more in Gaza

AGENCIES

Israel's latest attacks on Gaza have killed at least 151 people, including 11 in a single house, Palestinian health officials said yesterday, while the UN humanitarian office accused Israel of blocking its efforts to send aid to the north.

Meanwhile, all internet and telecom services in besieged Gaza were cut yesterday, the main operator said.

"We regret to announce that all telecom services in Gaza Strip have been lost due to the ongoing aggression. Gaza is blacked out again," said Paltel in a post on X, formerly Twitter.

Residents reported continued aerial and ground fire across the territory from Israel, which has come under growing pressure to limit the number of civilian casualties.

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