

US-ISRAEL WAR ON IRAN

Countries take drastic steps amid supply crunch

AGENCIES

The Middle East war has sparked a global energy and fertiliser crisis, forcing countries, especially in Asia, to take drastic measures to manage the supply crunch.

Sri Lanka yesterday announced a nearly 40 percent increase in electricity prices from Wednesday as it battles an energy shortage caused by the war.

The Public Utilities Commission of Sri Lanka said further increases were likely in April, in-line with global energy prices.

Sri Lanka has raised fuel prices three times this month, increasing them by more than a third, and has announced a four-day working week in a bid to save energy. The government has also asked the private sector to reintroduce work-from-home arrangements where possible.

South Korea is also considering extending driving curbs to the general public if global oil prices climb further, senior officials said.

Finance Minister Koo Yun-cheol said on Sunday the government could expand restrictions on passenger car use beyond public institutions if crude prices rise to around \$120-\$130 a barrel.

If expanded to the entire public, the policy would mark the country's first nationwide driving curbs since the 1991 Gulf War, when the government imposed a 10-day vehicle rotation system to conserve energy.

India yesterday said the disruption has impacted domestic production of urea, making the current

situation "very vulnerable".

April and May are crucial for stocking ahead of crop cycles, though officials noted these are relatively lean months for farm activity, allowing time to bridge supply gaps through imports.

Indian government sources said petrol and diesel are available in sufficient quantities across the country, even as the government continues to monitor distribution closely.

Earlier, the Philippines declared a "national energy emergency," saying its fuel reserves would last about 45 days, while Taiwan said it held roughly 11 days of LNG "safety stock."

Several countries are also revisiting Covid-era policies to reduce energy use.

Pakistan announced a four-day workweek for public offices and a two-week closure of schools and universities. Indonesia is considering hybrid schooling and a one-day-per-week remote working model from April.

Vietnam has urged workplaces to adopt remote working, while Thailand has instructed public sector employees to work from home and suspend overseas travel.

The effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz, a narrow channel along the Iranian coast, has stopped the passage of 20 percent of the world's oil and liquefied natural gas and a major portion of fertiliser since the US and Israel began airstrikes on Iran on February 28. Much of it was bound for Asia, including China, India, Japan and South Korea.



Opposition leader and Jamaat-e-Islami Ameer Shafiqur Rahman meeting with Prime Minister Tarique Rahman and LGRD Minister Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir at the Parliament Secretariat yesterday.

PHOTO: PM PRESS WING

Bangladesh races to secure fertiliser

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Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, while exploring options with Russia despite sanctions-related complications, as well as alternatives such as Brunei, Malaysia, and Vietnam. Meanwhile, in the current situation, China has stopped exporting fertiliser.

A senior official of the agriculture ministry said the government is also working to explore whether US sanctions on Russia could be eased to allow fertiliser imports from that country.

He added that a letter was sent to Iran through the foreign ministry on March 29 to ensure safe transit of shipments from the Middle East, which pass through the Strait of Hormuz.

The same day, a meeting at the industry ministry decided to issue a tender for the import of an additional 200,000 tonnes of urea fertiliser.

Rahman expressed optimism that the Ghorashal Polish Fertilizer PLC will resume operations shortly, while Karnaphuli Fertilizer Company Limited and Shahjalal Fertilizer

Company Limited are expected to resume operations by May.

Currently, the country has urea stock until June this year, while non-urea fertiliser stock will last until October, said Ahmed Faisal Imam, additional secretary for fertiliser management and monitoring branch at the agriculture ministry.

Bangladesh requires over 26 lakh tonnes of urea annually, of which around 10 lakh tonnes are produced domestically. The rest have to be imported from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, all of which ship fertiliser, gas, and oil through the Strait of Hormuz.

Aman rice, which is grown in a season beginning after June, accounts for 40 percent of the total annual rice crop, estimated at around 4 crore tonnes in the 2024-25 fiscal year.

Azajul Haque, research officer of fertiliser management and monitoring at the Ministry of Agriculture, said Bangladesh imports non-urea fertilisers from Russia, Canada, Morocco, China, Tunisia, Jordan, and Egypt.

Urea is mainly imported from Saudi Arabia and Qatar, he told the reporter.

He stated that current fertiliser stocks stand at 373,100 tonnes of urea, 381,200 tonnes of TSP, 538,500 tonnes of DAP, and 318,200 tonnes of MOP.

Regarding import routes, he said the Hormuz route is used most frequently, particularly for imports from Middle Eastern countries, while shipments from Russia, Canada, and China do not face such issues.

According to a recent CNBC report, analysts said they had seen the cost of FOB (Free On Board) granular urea in Egypt -- a bellwether of nitrogen fertilisers -- jump to around \$700 per metric ton, up from \$400 to \$490 before the war began.

The peak season for fertiliser demand is November to March, mainly for Boro rice cultivation, when Bangladesh uses 60 percent of the fertiliser used in crop production.

Apart from urea, the government also plans to sign a contract with Egypt to import Diammonium Phosphate and Triple Super Phosphate fertilisers.

Govt hunting for fuel worldwide

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Secretariat yesterday.

Officials did not provide details on the procurement mechanism, including whether shipments would come directly from Russia or via a third country.

In the meantime, Dhaka has also been trying to secure additional supplies from regional partners.

Officials said India had earlier committed to supplying around 60,000 tonnes of diesel between January and June under an existing arrangement. However, before the conflict escalated, Bangladesh received only about 5,000 tonnes.

Subsequent communications at ministerial and secretary levels yielded additional shipments. So far, Bangladesh has received three consignments of 5,000 tonnes each through the India-Bangladesh pipeline and another shipment of 7,000 tonnes via the sea route, bringing the total diesel imports from India to roughly 22,000 tonnes.

Meanwhile, two additional shipments -- each estimated at around 6,000 tonnes -- are expected from Indonesia.

As part of exploring new sources to diversify imports, the government has been reaching out to Singapore, Malaysia, Nigeria, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Angola, Australia, and the United States for potential fuel and gas supplies.

"In several cases, we have received positive responses, as two LNG shipments have been confirmed from Angola and Australia," said the ministry spokesperson.

Authorities have also reached out to Iran to explore possible shipment arrangements, though logistical and security complications naturally remain.

Spokesperson Monir Hossain said, "In the present situation, moving cargo through the Hormuz is extremely risky. In many cases, vessels not carrying the Bangladesh flag may face restrictions."

Iran has reportedly indicated that Bangladeshi vessels may be allowed to operate through the strait, though

Dhaka is still waiting for formal confirmation.

Officials said they have examined several alternatives, but many have turned out to be economically unviable.

One proposal involved routing fuel through a 150km pipeline to Yanbu in Saudi Arabia. However, additional port charges, transit fees, and handling costs would significantly raise the overall import price.

"All procurement decisions must ultimately be economically viable," the spokesperson added.

The search for new suppliers has also grown more difficult, as some traditional exporters are raising surcharges on top of already surging oil prices in the global market.

Despite the uncertainties, officials said Bangladesh's short-term fuel supply remains adequate.

Two shipments scheduled to arrive yesterday and April 3 are expected to bring in about 54,600 tonnes of diesel. Another 7,000 tonnes from India's Numaligarh Refinery Ltd are due in April.

Additional diesel shipments from Malaysian suppliers are also expected, which could bring total imports in April to a little over 1 lakh tonnes. Besides, the current stock of 1.37 lakh tonnes of diesel is expected to ease the crisis for the time being.

However, officials cautioned that it is too early to predict supply conditions for May and June.

For the time being, the government is able to secure supplies for the immediate future, the ministry spokesperson said, urging people not to panic.

REGULATING DISTRIBUTION

The government is also preparing measures to regulate domestic fuel consumption.

Officials said a digital "fuel pass" system based on QR codes is under consideration to curb panic buying and regulate distribution. Under the proposed system, each registered vehicle would receive a QR code allowing it to purchase a fixed quantity of fuel within a specified period.

Once fuel is collected, the system would prevent the same vehicle from making repeated purchases before the next cycle.

Authorities are thinking about bringing motorcycles under the scheme, as octane consumption has surged in recent weeks. The system would operate through a digital platform recording vehicle registration details, purchase time, and fuel quantities, allowing authorities to monitor distribution more closely.

According to the ministry, the passes would likely be issued centrally and distributed through filling stations to avoid administrative complications.

Authorities said the agriculture sector remains the top priority in fuel allocation, particularly during the irrigation season.

Diesel distribution is being coordinated through lists prepared by agricultural officers at the upazila level to ensure farmers receive adequate supplies.

"So far we've not received complaints from any district administration about diesel shortages affecting irrigation," the energy ministry spokesperson said.

In addition, the government is weighing a set of austerity measures, including extending weekends and introducing work-from-home and online classes, he added.

RIPPLE EFFECT

Fuel prices have risen sharply in Nepal, Bhutan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka, in some cases by more than 25 percent.

Besides, the Philippines has declared a national energy emergency, while Cuba has recently reported critically low fuel reserves.

By comparison, officials say Bangladesh's overall fuel management remains relatively stable.

The supply of diesel, which makes up about 63 percent of national consumption, has yet to face any disruption, according to ministry sources.

The main concern lies in the procurement and distribution of octane, which accounts for just over six percent of total demand, they added.

Measles vaccine age lowered to six months

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to carry out the task, The Daily Star has learnt from meeting attendants.

The advisory group held the meeting amid a surge in measles cases, with at least 40 children reported dead from measles or related complications as of Sunday. The actual number of deaths could be higher.

A total of 676 positive measles cases have been reported until Sunday to the DGHS, though the actual number could be higher.

Children aged nine months and 15 months receive measles vaccination twice under the regular immunisation programme, said Shahriar Sajjad, director of the Expanded Programme on Immunisation (EPI).

The vaccination rate is 90 to 92 percent, so special vaccination campaigns are usually carried out every four years, with the latest one held in 2020.

The planned special campaign in 2024 could not be conducted due to

unrest in the country, he said.

However, 34 percent of the measles patients in this outbreak are under nine months, and the meeting therefore decided to lower the measles vaccine age to six months during the special vaccination campaign.

During the campaign, the vaccine will be given to children aged six months to five years. However, in six districts where the vaccine dropout rate is relatively high, it will be administered to children aged six months to 10 years, he said.

The age for routine measles vaccination will remain nine months, as they need to analyse all data before making any changes to the age limit for regular vaccination.

Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, the public-private global health partnership that helps vaccinate children in the world's poorest countries, funds the vaccine and other logistics for the special campaign, according to Sajjad.

While Gavi has already provided

two crore measles vaccines for the campaign, the other logistics like syringes and others are yet to arrive.

EPI had planned to carry out the special campaign in mid-April but it would not be possible as Gavi said they would be able to provide syringes between May and July. In that case, the campaign can be delayed, he said.

Asked about the shortage of measles vaccine, he said the vaccine is still available at the field level but it would be exhausted.

"So, we have written to Gavi to use the vaccines intended for the special campaign for routine vaccination and will replace them when we procure vaccines for regular use," he said.

Meanwhile, Health Minister Sardar Md Sakhawat Husain yesterday reiterated that the cabinet committee on government purchase approved a Tk 604 crore proposal for procuring vaccines last week and will attempt to bring the shots as soon as possible.

All attackers of July activists to face action

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legally and constitutionally protected under the July National Charter, and added that an ordinance issued during the interim government to safeguard them has been placed before parliament and is expected to be passed as a bill with consensus.

"The Awami fascist groups are demanding justice for killings on social media. As I said before -- if that is the case, then freedom fighters too would have to be tried for killing Razakars, if someone now files a case."

He noted that specific cases have been filed over police killings. "Some are being tried at the International Crimes Tribunal, while others are under the Penal Code in regular courts. Investigations are ongoing, and some charge sheets have already been submitted," he said, adding that courts will conduct trials independently, without government interference.

Responding to another supplementary question from BNP MP Abul Kalam Azad Siddiqui, Salahuddin said some politically motivated and false cases were withdrawn during the interim government. "After BNP came to power, one of its first tasks was to withdraw false cases. Cases against political activists, journalists, and people from various professions

were reviewed and withdrawn upon application."

Noting that district-level committees were formed under the leadership of district magistrates, he said, "Politically motivated cases filed between 2009 and 2024 can be submitted for withdrawal through these committees, which review and forward them to the ministry."

"Based on recommendations from a committee led by the law minister, cases are then withdrawn under Section 494 of the Criminal Procedure Code."

'ROAD BLOCKADES WON'T BE ALLOWED'

The home minister, responding to another question, said, "The tendency to block highways and roads to press demands, which was seen during the interim government and in some cases inspired by its weakness, will never be allowed by us."

He said that as part of the democratic process, demands will exist, and petitions can certainly be submitted to the relevant authorities, ministries, or departments in that regard.

"To build public opinion, seminars and symposiums can be organised, and if necessary, those demands can be expressed through public gatherings.

"The right to association, the right to speak -- we will ensure these. That can be done. It is democratic culture," he said, adding that all must move away from the tendency of pressing demands through mobs.

Responding to a question by Brahmanbaria-2 MP Rumeen Farhana, Salahuddin reiterated, "There will be no kind of mob culture in Bangladesh."

Asking what steps the government would take to stop mob culture, Rumeen said that for 15 long years of Awami League rule, there was a culture of enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and torture in custody.

"Then during the interim government, we witnessed mob culture. From September 2024 to January 2026, statistics show that more than 250-300 people were killed after falling prey to mobs."

To this, Salahuddin said, "I do not have that exact statistic. What we have is an estimate.... Since taking on this responsibility, incidents resembling mob violence -- though not exactly mobs -- have occurred during this period. Because here we must distinguish definitions."

"The definition of mob is different. When it is a specific crime, the definition of crime is different."