

GAS SHORTAGES RISK REVERSING PUSH TO EXPAND PAK FORESTS

ISLAMABAD: Each winter, a familiar sight crops up in Islamabad and the nearby bustling city of Rawalpindi: People queuing outside firewood shops, waiting their turn to fill bags or plastic baskets with wood to burn when their household gas supply is disrupted. Gas shortages are increasingly hitting households during the chilly winter months, often when people are trying to prepare dinner or need to heat their homes in the evenings.

"What else can one do other than burning fuelwood, when one does not get gas supplied at his home?" grumbled Muhammad Razaq, a 50-year-old government employee, as he recently collected a load of firewood. Last winter, he said, he needed to buy firewood for cooking and heating water for bathing and dishwashing when no gas was available at his rented home on the outskirts of Islamabad. Summer temperatures have now reduced the need for heating, but environmentalists worry that worsening gas shortages are fueling a new surge of deforestation in the country - and could derail ambitious efforts to plant trees and reverse the country's large-scale forest losses.

"We and our environment will be completely deprived of the environmental and health gains of these afforestation programs by 2030," said Riffat

Naseem Malik of the Department of Forestry and Wildlife Management at the University of Haripur in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province, which is working to replant a billion new trees. "People will be chopping down these trees even more rapidly to meet their domestic energy needs as long as the government fails to stave off the huge gas supply shortfall," he said.

Turn on the Gas

Gas consumption in Pakistan has grown by more than 80 percent over the last 20 years. As the country's population grows rapidly, the number of domestic gas connections has more than doubled, from around 4 million to 8.4 million, according to the Pakistan Economic Survey 2016-17. Although the government reports that just under 30 percent of households have access to gas, the state-owned Oil and Gas Regulatory Authority estimates domestic gas demand to be 5.8 billion cubic feet per day, compared to production of around 4.1 billion cubic feet - a shortfall of 1.7 billion cubic feet. The authority warned in April this year that by 2030 the gap will rise to as much as 3.9 billion cubic feet per day.

The country is unable to meet demand in part because of inadequate investment in gas explo-

ration in Pakistan, due in part to the country's poor security situation. But experts point to other factors behind the gas shortfall as well, including inadequate maintenance of existing gas pipeline networks, the diversion of large quantities of gas from supplying households to fuelling power plants in order to cut oil import expenses, and a steep rise in the conversion of vehicles to compressed natural gas as a cheap fuel source.

Mukhtar Ahmed, a former energy adviser to the prime minister, estimates that by 2030 Pakistan's overall demand for energy will increase 350 percent, while the proportion of the country's total energy needs met from domestic sources will fall from 72 percent to 38 percent.

Less Gas, Fewer Trees?

The gas shortfall has alarmed forest and environment experts in a country where 27,000 hectares of forest are chopped down each year, according to the government's National Forest Policy, published in 2015. A report by the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization says that deforestation has averaged 42,000 hectares annually since 1990, reducing the country's forested area by more than 40 percent between 1990 and 2015. Forests now

cover less than 2 percent of Pakistan's land area, one of the lowest levels in the region, the report said.

Conservationists fear worsening gas shortages could reverse recent forest gains from projects such as the ambitious Billion Tree Tsunami project in the northwest province of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, and the prime minister's Green Pakistan Programme, which aims to plant 100 million trees nationally over a five-year period. The architect of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa project, Malik Amin Aslam, said that the provincial government is working on plans to reduce people's reliance on fuel wood.

Solar and Hydropower Push

The province is supporting the installation of more than 350 community-based micro-hydropower projects, at a cost of 5 billion Pakistani rupees (\$48 million), to electrify millions of off-grid rural households, he said. The small hydropower plants will generate 35 megawatts of electricity, he said. "The project is already 70 percent completed and, in fact, the ambition has recently been expanded to take it to 1,000 micro-hydro units by 2018. As these remote locations are close to or in the middle of pristine natural forests, this provides a carbon-free alternative to cutting trees," Amin Aslam said. — Reuters

SHARIF TO BE QUESTIONED OVER FAMILY'S WEALTH

KARACHI: Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif will be questioned on Thursday by investigators probing how his family obtained its vast wealth, the first time a sitting Pakistani premier has appeared before any investigative agency. Sharif's office yesterday confirmed the prime minister had received a summons by the Joint Investigation Team (JIT), set up by the Supreme Court to investigate corruption claims that surfaced following the Panama Papers leak. It said he would be attending an interview on Thursday.

Pakistan's stock market slumped 4 percent as the news sent shudders through investors, fearful that instability in its fragile democracy would undermine an economy that has shown stronger growth in recent years. Sharif has denied any wrongdoing over his family allegedly using offshore companies to buy luxury flats in a posh London neighborhood, and said his family wealth was acquired legally. His spokesman did not respond to requests for comment over the latest development.

In April, the Supreme Court ruled that there was insufficient evidence to remove Sharif from office on the back of Panama Papers leaks, but it ordered further investigations. The JIT team comprises members of civilian agencies, such as the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), as well as mem-

bers of powerful military bodies, including the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency. The JIT's work has become highly politicized in recent weeks. Sharif's camp has sought to remove two members of the JIT team, and his PML-N party voiced outrage over a leaked photograph taken from security camera footage showing Sharif's son, Hussain, appearing before the JIT.

According to the summons document, seen by Reuters, JIT asked the Prime Minister's office to bring "all relevant record/documents/material" to the interview at its office in the capital, Islamabad on Thursday. "It's a litmus test of our laws that are all citizens are equal in front of law, so we believe that Nawaz Sharif should appear before JIT in this case," said Naeem ul Haque, spokesman for opposition Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party.

The Supreme Court began investigating Sharif after the main political parties failed to agree on a committee to probe the Panama Papers leaks, and PTI's chairman, Imran Khan, threatened mass protests and to shut down Islamabad. If Sharif survives the JIT probe, opinion polls suggest he is favorite to win the next election, due by June 2018. Sharif, a three-time prime minister, was ousted twice in the 1990s, including by a military coup in 1999, but he swept back to power in an election in 2013. — Agencies



NOIDA, India: In this June 8, 2017 photo, Indian boy Brijesh, who claims to be 16 year old but doesn't know his birthday, poses for a photo as he sits on corn stalks next to a busy expressway. — AP

MILLIONS OF CHILDREN LABOR IN INDIA, SOME IN SWELTERING HEAT

UNDERGROUND MUMBAI CHILD SEX TRADE A CONCERN

NOIDA, India: Every 100 m or so along a busy expressway on the outskirts of New Delhi, you'll find a child selling corn - quite possibly a child too young to be working legally. Twelve-year-old Prakash is one of them. Lolling amid the discarded husks from earlier sales, he doesn't seem bothered by the 40 degree Celsius heat or the buzzing flies. "We all work together and live together," he says, gesturing toward 15 or so other boys working the highway.

Each is dropped off by their employer every morning with a sack full of boiled corn. They spend their days trying to flag down drivers. They don't leave until their sacks are empty, sometimes 12 hours later. Are all as young as Prakash? There's no way to be sure. Each seems to change their age with each answer, often forgetting the number they previously mentioned. Most are careful, however, to use a number above 14 - the legal age in India to work in non-family enterprises. Young men, whom the boys claim are their elder brothers, patrol the highway on motorcycles, ensuring business runs smoothly. They also tell them not to speak to visiting journalists.

Most comply, anxious to keep jobs that pay about \$80 per month - far more than they could earn back home. All the boys have moved to

Noida, southeast of New Delhi, from rural villages in search of work. Yesterday, the World Day Against Child Labor, the International Labour Organization said 168 million children are laborers, or about one in nine children overall. India, in its 2011 census, estimated the country had 8.3 million child laborers. Uttar Pradesh state, where Noida is located, alone accounted for 1.8 million of that total. UNICEF says there has been an overall decline in child labor in India, but that urban areas have seen an increase. Meanwhile, Prakash and the other boys are still selling their corn late in the afternoon. Their sacks are not yet empty.

Separately, the number of children trafficked for sex in the red light districts of Mumbai has dropped sharply, activists said, as they raised concerns over the trade shifting underground to private lodges and residences. A study by the non-governmental International Justice Mission (IJM), Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in Mumbai, mapped nearly 10,000 commercial sex workers in more than 1,000 brothels, and about 200 sex workers operating from private establishments.

In brothels, it found the prevalence of minors had dropped to 5.5 percent during the course of the study from 2015 to 2016, from an estimated 40 percent in the past. It found 25 minors in pri-

ate locations. "About six to seven years ago, a customer could talk to a pimp and ask for a young girl. Now, it is not possible. They will first say no, until they establish the customer is not a police informer," said Sanjay Macwan, regional director for India at IJM. "We strongly believe the number of children has gone down."

He credited the drop to police anti-human trafficking units and new laws that have made sexual offences against minors punishable by a maximum of life imprisonment. Macwan said the study was not aimed at tracking a shift of young girls from public to private venues, but it did point to the need for more research. "We need to understand how crime is going into covert spaces. Our biggest challenge was to find girls in private locations," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. Some of Asia's oldest and largest red light districts are in Mumbai, a key destination for trafficked women and children. Most are lured from other states and neighboring countries, often with the promise of good jobs in a home or shop. Instead, many are forced into sex work or manual labor. The sex trade has shifted over the past five to 10 years from hot spots such as Kamathipura, Mumbai's oldest red light district, to private lodges and residential areas. — Agencies



KARACHI: A Pakistani stockbroker is reflected on a monitor as he watches share prices during a trading session at the Pakistan Stock Exchange (PSX) yesterday. — AFP

'NO PLACE FOR THE POOR' IN INDIA'S SMART CITIES

MUMBAI: An ambitious government plan to upgrade India's cities risks further marginalizing poor and minority communities and hastening slum evictions, while failing to address the reasons villagers move to urban areas, campaigners said. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Smart Cities Mission aims to modernize 100 cities by 2020 with high-speed internet, uninterrupted power and water supply, efficient public transport and living standards comparable to Europe.

But the \$7.5 billion plan does not address the needs and rights of poor women and marginalized groups including minorities and migrants, according to a report by New Delhi-based advocacy group Housing and Land Rights Network, India (HLRN). Nearly 14 million households live in urban slums across India, with a further 3 million living on city streets. The drive for Smart Cities has already triggered evictions of people from slums and informal settlements in cities including Indore, Bhubaneswar, Delhi and Kochi without ade-

quate compensation or alternate accommodation. Plans to spruce up central business districts and build urban rail lines are likely to displace tens of thousands more, the report said. "The premise of the 'smart city' as a relevant model needs a fundamental re-evaluation, given the increasing levels of exclusion, impoverishment, unemployment, homelessness, forced evictions and displacement of the urban poor in our cities," said Shivani Chaudhry, executive director at HLRN.

Officials say India's congested cities - 13 of which are among the 20 most polluted in the world - desperately need a makeover to improve residents' quality of life. "The mission provides the choice to those who live in squalor to live with dignity, in a more hospitable environment with basic infrastructure," said A A Rao, a spokesman for the housing ministry which is overseeing the plan. "In every instance, people are taken on board, and there have been no forced evictions to my knowledge," he said. — Reuters



MUMBAI: Indian workers walk past fencing at a construction site for the forthcoming metro train project yesterday. — AFP

TOURISTS FLEE DARJEELING AS TROUBLE BOILS

KOLKATA: Thousands of tourists fled the Indian hill resort of Darjeeling yesterday after local activists demanding the creation of a new Indian state warned that a general strike could degenerate into violence. Hundreds of troops and riot police patrolled the streets of the famed tea-producing resort in eastern India as panicked tourists packed their bags. Riots and arson attacks in Darjeeling last week left 12 people injured and the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM) group warned that the weekend that "untoward" events could happen when the general strike started yesterday.

The hills are famous for the Darjeeling tea whose production is jealously guarded. It is also famed for its "toy train" - a 78-km uphill ride from New Jalpaiguri. But the troubles have dealt a major blow to the crucial tourism industry. Pradip Lama, secretary of the Darjeeling Tourist Association of Travel Agents, told AFP that worried visitors - most of them from other parts of India - are leaving and nearly 70 percent of bookings have been cancelled. "Till Sunday, 7,000 tourists left Darjeeling," Lama said.

The GJM wants a new state named Gorkhaland in the hill region, which is now part of West Bengal. Tensions have also risen over a government decision to introduce the Bengali language in schools. Indigenous Gorkhas, who mainly speak Nepali, are furious. "We had heard about the trouble and still reached the hill resort on Friday, hoping that the situation would be normal," Priya Roy, a visitor from the southern city of Bangalore, told AFP. "We have decided to leave Darjeeling after GJM's warning to tourists."

Another tourist said their group's vehicle was mobbed by slogan-shouting protesters who demanded to know their identities. "I clutched at my mother's arm even as she begged with folded hands, pleading with them to let us go,"

Kamalika Chatterjee told AFP. Bimal Gurung, head of the GJM, told AFP his warning to the tourists was "for their own safety" as the events could worsen anytime if his group launches a full-scale campaign for a separate state.

Darjeeling district magistrate Joyoshi Dasgupta said at least a dozen GJM activists had been detained for allegedly instigating the violence. "A group of suspected GJM activists tried to set fire to government offices... on Monday. Security was stepped up in front of all government offices in the hills of Darjeeling as a precautionary measure," Dasgupta said. The GJM denied its members were involved in violence.



DARJEELING, India: Indian army personnel stand guard along a street during an indefinite strike called by the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM) yesterday. — AFP

The Gorkhas have been campaigning for decades for the new state. They say Bengali-speaking outsiders have exploited their resources and imposed their culture and language. A similar agitation in 2007 led to the granting of some administrative powers to local people. Many groups in India have waged similar campaigns to break away from larger states, mostly on linguistic and ethnic grounds or in hopes of economic benefits. The last successful agitation led to the formation of Telangana state in 2014. India is made up of 29 states and seven federally administered territories, which include the capital region New Delhi. — AFP