**How to help the people**

Abdul Sattar

Saturday, Oct 21, 2023

The drastic reduction in petroleum prices has led to sighs of relief among the people of the country, who had been reeling under ruthless inflation. The decision might go some way in elevating the suffering of Pakistanis who have witnessed nothing but economic hardships and immense financial difficulties owing to the new liberal agenda of various governments. The move will also boost the image of the caretaker government in the eyes of the people besides creating a favourable opinion for the elements of the state that are propping up the current dispensation.

But while people would definitely appreciate the government’s relief measure, they would also like to see if this will lead to the drastic slashing of essential commodities’ prices or not. Federal Minister for Information and Broadcasting Murtaza Solangi appealed to traders to reduce the prices of commodities given that a drastic reduction has now been made in the prices of petroleum goods.

Our traders lose no time in raising the prices of commodities every time the government announces an increase in petroleum products’ prices. But when the prices of petrol and diesel are decreased, they don’t bother to reduce the prices of commodities. Consequently, for a common citizen – from rice to flour, vegetables to fruits and cooking oil to lentils – everything remains as costly as it was before the reduction of oil prices.

Traders are a powerful pressure group that neither want to let the government document the economy nor are they ready to pay a fair share of their taxes. Their associations and bodies spring into action whenever the government tries to carry out any documentation, but take no action when their fellow traders continue to charge people exorbitantly for essential goods and commodities despite the reduction in petroleum prices.

These traders have a strong lobby that influences almost every political party but a large number of them have traditionally been supporters of the PML-N. Therefore, if the party of the former prime minister is really interested in helping Kakar’s government extend relief to the over 220 million people of this country then it must use its influence to rein in these unbridled traders.

It is also claimed that many of these traders impose appalling working conditions on their employees, forcing them to work in 12-hour shifts and paying them very meagre salaries. Low wages and non-implementation of labour laws is also one of the factors contributing to poverty in Pakistan. For instance, imagine if industrial concerns, business entities and trading centres start extending health Insurance, annual bonus, life insurance and other facilities to their workers, it could drastically reduce their household expenses, especially healthcare for their families. Similarly, one would hardly come across any concept of annual paid leave at these entities, something that is mandatory in the civilized world.

It is said that industries in the past would set up a housing colony for labourers, a dispensary or hospital and schools and parks. Some of these industries may be around even today, but with time and the Islamization of society, the industrial and business classes instead of meeting their legal obligations by respecting workers’ started pumping money into sectarian and extremist organizations and building religious places. They have every right to give charity for religious purposes but that can only be appreciated after they have met the legal obligations which require them to extend a number of facilities to the workers that help them amass immense wealth.

So, reducing petroleum goods prices will not be enough. The government will have to make sure that the benefits of this reduction goes to the people directly. Therefore, it is important that those who have ensured the depreciation of dollars during the past few weeks should coordinate with local administrations to make sure that traders also reduce prices of commodities, especially essential goods. If the price of cooking oil, lentils, rice, wheat, fruits, vegetables, beef and chicken is also slashed, it might help more than 90 million Pakistanis who have been condemned to a life of poverty and misery.

It has been observed that after the federal government reduces the prices of petroleum goods, provincial administrations don’t take interest in controlling the prices of other commodities that had become expensive because of the rising prices of fuel. Since price control falls under the jurisdiction of provincial governments, it is important that local administrations in all federating units waste no time in checking the prices of essential commodities in their markets because this relief is likely to be there for only 15 days.

Given the volatile situation in the Middle East and threats by Israel to extend the scope of the conflict in one of the most sensitive regions of the world, it is quite possible that the prices of petroleum goods will witness a dramatic rise during the next few months. Therefore, it is important for the government to find alternate routes of cheap oil and energy sources so that this relief could be prolonged, which would definitely help the millions of people who have been battered by skyrocketing inflation during the past few years.

Ties between Washington and Islamabad are growing again and it seems that the two traditional allies are getting closer. The US might need Pakistan’s support on several international issues. Pakistan should seize this opportunity to convince the US and the West that, given the faltering economic situation, it is profoundly important for Pakistan to see alternate routes of energy and petroleum goods which is one of the biggest burdens on the exchequer. It is also one of the sources of foreign reserves’ draining.

The supply of oil and gas from Iran could be one of the cheapest ways but owing to Western sanctions, Pakistan has been unable to take advantage of the natural wealth of its neighbour. In the past, Pakistan’s close alliance with Saudi Arabia was also one of the factors preventing the ruling elites of the country from hobnobbing with the rulers of the theocratic state. But the recent rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran has created a possibility for Pakistan to take advantage and strike trade and business deals with Iran.

US sanctions obstruct Pakistan’s move to get such supplies from Iran. Despite being very close to the US, India has been importing oil from countries like Iran and Russia. The US granted a waiver to India but it seems Washington is not ready to extend the same favour to its traditional ally that had not only been in the Western camp during the cold war but also played a significant role during the ‘war on terror’ that was meant to eliminate global terror outfits.

If the government really wants to extend help and succor to the people and offer them a permanent relief then it is not possible without improving the overall situation of the economy and such improvement heavily depends on normalizing ties with neighbours and benefiting from the trade and mineral wealth that they might offer. Therefore, we must make hectic efforts to translate the Iran-Pakistan pipeline into a reality besides seeking ways to import cheap goods from India that might also help Pakistanis get some relief from the ruthless skyrocketing inflation. If the government really wants to ensure long-term relief for the people, then it must take some unconventional decisions, including normalization of ties with India. This could be a recipe for long-term relief.

The writer is a freelance journalist who can be reached at: egalitarianism444@gmail.com