**Running the stove**

**The import bill has to be drastically slashed**

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The Islamic Republic of Pakistan faces a serious food and stove crisis. Due to a shortage of fuel the stove is cold and there is no flour to make bread. In the decade of the seventies, Bhutto launched his party on the promise of food, clothing and shelter, which still remains a pipe dream. Even bread is out of reach of the common man. Natural gas is short and expensive. It is back to the basics from where the journey had started. The 12 trillion cubic feet of natural gas deposit at Sui is now depleted together with an acute shortage of wheat. Both items are now being imported. While the fuel import bill is the highest followed by food items which pose serious sustainability challenges. There is a huge trade deficit as the republic does not earn enough dollars to pay for its basic needs. Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) is being imported from Qatar, also recently a shipment of wheat arrived from Russia resulting in the depletion of the much-needed foreign exchange reserves.

['India expanding settler-colonial project in IIOJK by grabbing Kashmiris' land'](https://www.nation.com.pk/12-Feb-2023/india-expanding-settler-colonial-project-in-iiojk-by-grabbing-kashmiris-land)

Every day I receive SMS messages saying “we buy ACs” indicating that there is a huge market for this product. While the nation struggles for food, air conditioners (AC) remain in demand for the few. As a nation, we cannot sustain this luxury on borrowed money. The import bill has to be drastically slashed. Food and fuel are the basic needs of the nation. Unfortunately, there has been a consistent decline in these two vital areas in the land of the pure. I remember the days when wood and coal were used to cook food. Kitchens were dirty and usually isolated from living quarters in posh dwellings. Every locality had a ‘tal’ (a place where wood was stored and sold). There were several coal merchants in the city who sold both local and imported fuel. In the sixties came the kerosene stoves which were a big relief for homemakers. Cooking meals was made a bit easier. Then there was a big breakthrough with the discovery of natural gas at Sui in the Dera Bugti area of Balochistan. There was no looking back. Gas transmission and distribution networks were developed by the two public sectors Gas Companies (SSGC, SNGPL). Pakistan now had the privilege of using the cleanest fossil fuel. Natural Gas is the final product of the carbon cycle. The organic matter first decays into coal followed by oil and then gas. Nature had been kind to the republic. Unfortunately, the resource was mismanaged, instead of lasting a century it fell short after fifty years of misuse (1952 to 2002).

[President felicitates Iran on 44th anniversary of Revolution](https://www.nation.com.pk/12-Feb-2023/piaf-rejects-hike-in-power-gas-tariffs-fears-increased-energy-rates-to-damage-economy)

In the year 2004, as Chairman Pakistan Science Foundation (PSF), I started looking at coal as an alternate fuel. A coal conference was organised. All players on the field were invited for input. A clear road map to move forward was developed with consensus. With no experience in large-scale commercial mining, it was decided to focus on this area at the largest deposit at Thar. Thus started a long, painful journey that has been ongoing since then. Finally, in the year 2018, I had the satisfaction of touching the coal seams at the bottom of the first mine jointly developed by the Sindh Government and ENGRO (Sindh Engro Coal Mining Company). Power production has now started at the mine, which is now connected to the national grid. At Rs 4 per unit, it is the cheapest source of muchneeded electricity. Now work has started on the production of Synthetic Natural Gas (SNG) from the huge deposit (175 billion tons).

Coal has been the historic fuel for mankind. Romans started using it centuries ago. It fueled the entire industrial revolution and also provided movement through the production of steam which started to move the wheels of the world. Steam engines brought the much-needed motion. In the year 2016, I was invited as a keynote speaker at the International Coal Conference in Pittsburgh (IPCC 2016) to talk about the future of coal. For fuel-starved nations like Pakistan, coal has a future but with the application of environmentally friendly 21st-century technologies. Gasification of this black gold is the way forward. Once gasified it can be converted into clean fuel which can then be used in place of natural gas. The country has a huge state-of-theart gas distribution network spread over several thousand kilometres which is now using expensive imported gas that is unaffordable with the current worldwide energy crises. Food is equally important. For a long time, the republic was self-sufficient in wheat which is now being imported in addition to other items like edible oil seeds and tea. All three of them can be grown locally with an effective roadmap to move forward. During my tenure at PSF (2002 to 2005), tea plantation areas were identified in Kashmir and KP together with trial plantations. The Tea Research Institute (NTRI) at Shinkiari has enough know-how to achieve self-sufficiency in this area. Oil seeds can also be grown on marginal lands to save the much-needed foreign exchange. Despite all the available indigenous resources, there is no justification to deprive the masses of the attainment of basic human needs like fuel and food. This crisis is uncalled for and can easily be overcome through astute planning with the utilisation of appropriate technologies. In 1952, we had the gift of Natural Gas at Sui, today we have black gold at Thar to meet our fuel needs.

[Folk singer Bashir Baloch passes away in Quetta](https://www.nation.com.pk/12-Feb-2023/folk-singer-bashir-baloch-passes-away-in-quetta)

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