

NEWS COVERAGE PERIOD FROM MAY 25TH TO MAY 31ST

FLOODING, LOCUST THREATS LOOM OVER PAKISTAN, SAYS NDMA CHIEF

Kalbe Ali Updated May 27, 2020

ISLAMABAD: Apart from coronavirus pandemic, two more threats — locust attack and possible flooding — are looming over Pakistan and the authorities have been working on measures to counter all of them, said National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) Chairman Lt Gen Mohammad Afzal on Tuesday.

Addressing a press conference, the NDMA chief said that operations against locusts had already been under way while the NDMA was also working to devise a comprehensive plan to deal with possible flooding this year.

Lt Gen Afzal said the plan would be shared with relevant authorities and public by the second week of June.

“We will try our best to utilise all the resources available in the country to tackle these threats and the whole nation will counter them effectively,” he added.

He said locust attack was a serious issue and this matter should not be politicised. “I appeal to all the leaderships of religious, political and social groups to join hands and concentrate to get rid of them (locusts) instead of point-scoring,” he said.

The NDMA chairman explained that the current locust attack was not in the category of swarms, but they were in groups. They were locally bred and indigenous.

He said that due to extensive cold and snowfall in Balochistan areas in January and February, the locusts did not move back to Iran and Africa but stayed in Pakistan and laid their eggs. “The current generation of locusts active in Southern Punjab are local but it was present in other provinces as well,” he highlighted.

The operation had been launched with the help of 1,500 teams of the NDMA along with the provincial disaster management authorities of Punjab, Sindh and Balochistan over two weeks back, he said.

“These teams have not slept for one night for the last 15 days because operations against locusts [are conducted] at night mainly just before sunrise,” he said.

Currently massive operations were under way in Multan, Dera Ghazi Khan, Bahawalpur, some areas of Faisalabad, Okara, Bakkhar and Layyah, the NDMA chairman said.

All requirements to kill and ward off locusts have been fulfilled as the Chinese government gifted 375,000 litres of pesticides to Pakistan, the Japanese gift of 50,000 litres would arrive here next week, while the NDMA also procured 175,000 litres and 100,000 litres of pesticides. Besides, nine aircraft — including five helicopters from army — were available for aerial spray, he said, adding that the NDMA was also in the process of procuring six more aircraft that he described as air-tractors. Subsequently, he added, the total number aerial-spray vehicles would rise to 15.

The NDMA chairman was also in talks with the Military Operations (MO) Directorate to prepare for heavy operations against locusts in uninhabited areas.

As the first threat from other parts of the world would be faced in June when locusts would start arriving from Iran and Oman, army teams would soon be deployed in D.G. Khan, D.I. Khan and on the Iranian border to kill locusts coming from there. “Those which arrive from the west will be dealt with at the Solemain lower mountains, but the serious offensive to eradicate the locusts will be in Cholistan and Thar deserts, to stop them from reaching the agricultural heartlands of the country,” Lt Gen Afzal said.

He said the army had dedicated 5,000 personnel in the anti-locust operation and 1,500 of them had been deployed in different provinces.

The NDMA chairman said the plant protection departments in the provincial departments had been rendered non-functional due to various reasons. One of the reasons was that Pakistan was facing locust attack after around 29 years, he said, adding that almost all the plant protection departments were devoid of entomologists. However, he said, the process to hire those experts on a one-year contract basis had been initiated.

Among the 11 locust-prone districts in Balochistan, 14 in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, eight in Sindh and 13 in Punjab, 218,315km area has been surveyed while around 161,724 square kilometres in all the four provinces had yet to be surveyed, he added.

Flooding threat

Briefing the media about possible threats of flooding this year, Lt Gen Afzal said it was expected as higher than normal rainfall during and after the winter and spring resulted in ample availability of water in reservoirs.

“Some areas received more than 29 per cent snowfall and the Gilgit-Baltistan region received more than 33.5 per cent snowfall this winter,” he said, adding that the Met Office had been requested to provide a long-term weather forecast report. As the report was expected to be finalised by next week, he said, the NDMA would devise its flood plan based on that report and it would be shared with the provinces, and public by June 12.

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HOW TO FIGHT OFF THE HERBIVOROUS INSECTS

Muhammad Ashraf May 27, 2020

The recent outbreak of swarms of locusts has threatened national food security, people’s livelihoods and economic development in the country. A single locust adult can consume fresh vegetation up to its own body weight. According to a projection of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), a swarm the size of one square kilometre can eat in one day a quantity of food consumed by 35,000 people.

Historically, the locust outbreaks have been reported in the country during the 1950s, 1960s and 1990s. The fourth invasion was witnessed recently in 2019 that hit Central and East Punjab, the premier food basket of the country.

A recent report by the FAO says that 38 per cent area of Pakistan (60pc of Balochistan, 25pc of Sindh and 15pc of Punjab) is infested by locust swarms. If locusts are not contained in these breeding regions, the entire country will be under a severe threat of invasion.

Moreover, there is a potential threat for a serious invasion in the Kharif season this year by swarms migrating from eastern parts of Africa and Southern Iran. Losses to agriculture by locust invasion are estimated to reach about Rs205 billion, considering a 15pc damage level in Rabi season. And for the Kharif crops, considering a 25pc damage level, the potential losses are estimated to be about Rs464bn.

To combat the current locust infestation, there is a dire need to devise and implement short- and long-term strategies with clearly defined roles and responsibilities of each of the stakeholders (Department of Plant Protection, provincial agriculture departments, National Disaster Management Authority, provincial disaster management authorities and army personnel) so as to sustainably eradicate the locust in the region.

A recent report by the FAO says that 38pc area of Pakistan - 60pc of Balochistan, 25pc of Sindh and 15pc of Punjab - is infested by locusts

As far as short-term strategies are concerned, most effective formulations of insecticides (Lambda cyhalothrin, malathion, fipronil, deltamethrin, chlorpyrifos) and insect growth regulators (triflumuron, teflubenzuron) must be identified for hopper bands and locust swarms.

To avoid the unwise use of pesticides, the local locust population can be controlled to reduce the frequency of outbreak with appropriate insecticides according to optimised dose rates. The most intriguing short-term strategy is to forecast the scattered migratory locust swarms from further dispersal in the first landing place/border areas through aerial spray with aircraft or other heavy machinery.

Pesticides must be applied on settled swarms on trees and bushes from early morning to 11:00 am and after 4:00 pm. Locust monitoring and forecasting ability, such as setting-up temporary monitoring stations in breeding regions and first landing places of migrating swarms, needs to be enhanced.

Advanced spraying machinery eg Micron sprayers and vehicle-mounted sprayers should be arranged at the earliest to combat migratory locust swarms in desert areas for the spray of ultra-low volume pesticide formulations. The locust egg-pods laid in the soil need to be immediately destroyed by appropriate cultural practices. To save foreign exchange for the import of spraying machinery, indigenous manufacturing of such equipment through reverse engineering needs to be encouraged.

It is pertinent to mention here that engineers of the University of Agriculture, Faisalabad, have designed a new sprayer that can spray the solution up to 50 feet high. The sprayer has been dispatched to the locust-affected areas for field trials. After getting approval from farmers in the field, it will be handed over to government agencies and farmers to effectively combat the locust attack. For the sake of public awareness, mass media campaigns are indispensable.

To establish an environment-friendly sustainable locust plague management system at national and provincial levels, long-term strategies need to be aptly adopted. For monitoring and surveillance of locust incidences, more efficient methods need to be developed.

Import of bio-control agents such as spore-forming microorganism and development of application methods for biological control against desert locusts in different geographical areas is quite plausible.

Moreover, an investigation should be made to find out natural enemies (predators and parasitoids) of desert locusts in highly invaded areas of the country. Microbial biopesticides should also be tested in desert areas against hopper bands.

Phyto-chemical based biopesticides derived from indigenous medicinal plants could also be evaluated for their toxic and antifeedant properties against different life stages of locust.

Similarly, nanoparticle encapsulated formulations of synthetic and botanical insecticides should be developed for the efficient control of locust with a lower dose rate. Molecular studies are also required for gene silencing to induce sterility to reduce the egg-laying potential of locusts.

In Pakistan, there is no research and development centre for locust control. Thus, to face this challenge, the University of Agriculture, Faisalabad, has recently set-up a full-fledged centre aiming at carrying out research related to locust control.

The writer is the vice-chancellor of the University of Agriculture, Faisalabad

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PUNJAB GOVERNMENT URGED TO COLLECT AGRICULTURE TAX ON NET INCOME BASIS

BR Web Desk May 27, 2020

The Overseas Investors Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OICCI) in its budget proposals for the financial year 2020-21 has urged the Punjab government to collect the agriculture tax on net income basis instead of landholding basis.

At present, the tax is payable on 'landholding' or 'net income' whichever is higher. However, the manner of determination of net income is complicated, and, in almost 100 percent of the cases, tax is received on a landholding basis. This discourages taxation on a net income basis. Therefore, taxability of income on landholding should be replaced with 'net income' basis.

The OICCI wants the Punjab government to introduce an advance tax on the sale of agriculture produce such as sugarcane, wheat, cotton which should be adjustable against the income tax payable on a net income basis.

There are only around 10 to 15 agencies and enterprises which acquire such crops. The advance tax should be adjustable against income tax payable on net income basis. Rates of withholding and the threshold for the same should be aligned with other products - for example any payment exceeding Rs 25,000 should be subject to advance tax at the rate of 1 to 3 percent as the case may be.

The federal taxation system may be used for such collection on behalf of the provincial government in the same manner as is being done in other cases by the provincial governments.

All persons holding land should obtain PTN (provincial tax number) like NTM maintained by the Federal Board of Revenue or in case of individuals CNIC (computerized national identity card) number can be the PTN. The definition of agriculture income should be amended to include all agriculture activities like non-corporate dairy farming and poultry. According to the proposals, the rent income for the use of agricultural land should be subject to the same rate of tax as is currently in vogue on property income under the FBR system. Under the specific provision, the rent for use of agricultural land, which is a general practice, especially for large landowners, is an agriculture income.

There is effectively no mechanism to ensure completeness of recovery of taxes from such receipts. Such rent income should be subject to the same rate of tax as is currently in vogue on property income under the FBR system.

With a view to broaden the tax net, the tax authorities should use technology, data analytics including artificial intelligence tools and make better/effective utilization of the NADRA database and other documented sources to ensure that all income earners from services are included in the provincial taxpayers' list.

The sales tax collection from other cities in Punjab and new sectors of services should be shared at least quarterly with the stakeholders like OICCI showing growth faster than in collections from mature markets like Lahore.

The sales tax on services for income tax non-filers should be double the tax on filers of tax returns. Additionally, preferential treatments to active filers may also help like active filers should be given early utility connections.

To widen the scope of tax collections from services, marriage halls, art exhibition halls, and other public places holding functions where economic transactions are done should provide names and addresses of persons involved in these business activities to the provincial tax authorities on a quarterly basis.

The OICCI further suggested that the PRA (Punjab Revenue Authority) sales tax rates on services should be aligned with the Sindh sales tax rate, which is 13 percent and gradually reduced to 10 percent over the next three years to be aligned with the regional countries.

The current rate should be maintained for unregistered entities. The rate gap will encourage registration of the unregistered taxpayers to avail of the benefits of input adjustment and will enhance documentation.

Amendments be made to provincial sales tax act on services to allow the registered persons to claim input tax related to procured goods/services taxable at whatever rate (lower, standard or higher). Amendments should be made to provincial sales tax act on services to allow the registered persons to claim input tax related to procured goods/services taxable at whatever rate (lower, standard or higher).

A separate schedule should be inserted in provincial sales taxes act for zero-rating. All services provided to foreign companies outside Pakistan which result in inflow of foreign exchange and export of all taxable services should be exempted from Punjab Sales Tax on Services.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/27/600373/punjab-government-urged-to-collect-agriculture-tax-on-net-income-basis/>

MURAD ASKS FEDERAL GOVT TO PROVIDE MORE PLANES FOR OPERATION AGAINST LOCUSTS

The Newspaper's Staff Reporter May 28, 2020

KARACHI: Chief Minister (CM) Syed Murad Ali Shah on Wednesday urged the federal government to provide six aircraft for spraying in the desert areas as locust swarms had once again started attacking standing crops in Sindh.

Presiding over a meeting regarding the locust threat in the province, he said he was receiving reports from growers that locust swarms had again started attacking crops.

“This is a serious situation which must be addressed at the earliest, otherwise food security issue would be compromised,” he told the meeting attended by Agriculture Minister Ismail Rahu, Chief Secretary Mumtaz Shah, and other relevant officials.

The CM said that a letter was written to Prime Minister Imran Khan on May 1, 2020, with the request to provide six aircraft, ultra-low volume (ULV) sprayers, pesticides in sufficient quantity, and to deploy field teams. But, he said, no concrete steps had been taken.

“Only an old aircraft with one pilot has been kept at Sukkur which has to cover Sindh and Balochistan,” he lamented and urged the federal government to send five more aircraft and required pesticides and teams so that locusts could be controlled before preparation of the Kharif crops.

The agriculture minister told the meeting that initially Ghotki and Kashmore districts were affected by locust swarms in April 2020 and now mostly the desert areas of the province were under threat.

The meeting was told that locusts came from Balochistan and taking the route of Jacobabad, Larkana, Qambar-Shahdadkot and Jamshoro travelled to other districts. "Adult locust swarms almost affected all the districts, therefore the agriculture department took immediate efforts for survey and control operation," Mr Rahu said.

The locust, the meeting was informed, attacked Ghotki district in April 2020 affecting 18,829 acres and a similar attack was reported from Kashmore where emergency was declared and 19,227 acres were sprayed.

Mr Rahu said the insects were in desert areas of Tharparkar, Umerkot, Sanghar, Shaheed Benazirabad, Khairpur, Sukkur and Ghotki. From there they could move to crop areas, which was a serious threat.

He said the plant protection department of the federal government also helped the agriculture department in control operation in the districts of Ghotki, Kashmore and Khairpur and covered an area of 18,871 acres.

The agriculture minister said that agriculture extension teams covered all districts up to 43,935 acres. "In this way, over 62,813 acres have been treated in 22 districts of the province," Mr Rahu told the CM.

The CM was told that the agriculture department was carrying out survey and control operation in fields and desert areas.

The agriculture secretary said the NDMA and department of plant protection had provided safety kits for 28 teams to be used for control operation, deployed five teams along with spray vehicles, delivered 12 tractor-mounted air blasters for fields.

He said the air blasters were given by the Chinese government. "The agriculture department has also reserved 124,000 litres of ULV pesticides at Mirpurkhas and Sukkur for desert area spray and the DPP has also imparted training to 50 agriculture field officials for handling ULV sprayers," he added.

Brigadier Huzaifa told the meeting that the progressive movement of Iranian locust population from Fars, Jask and Sistan would take place by the end of May towards Pakistan. Control operation would be intensified during the migration of locusts to eliminate the threat, he added.

According to him, adult locusts are migrating towards green belt of India due to drying conditions in Thar and Rajasthan deserts. He said that it was expected that subsequent waves of locust swarms would settle in Thar for breeding.

Giving reference of 2019 locust migration, Brig Huzaifa said they would likely move towards Balochistan, Punjab and KP by the end of May. Its threat during the current month was felt in Kashmore, Ghotki at Tando Allahyar where spray was conducted in time, he added.

He said locust threat was expected during June from Khuzdar towards Dadu, Naushahro Feroze and Khairpur and from Lasbela to Thatta, Hyderabad, Mirpurkhas and Badin and then it would settle in Thar.

The CM directed the agriculture department, PDMA, NDPP and Corps 5 brigadier to share day to day situation of the threat and operation so that loopholes could be addressed.

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‘LOCUSTS MAY CAUSE LOSS OF OVER RS500B TO ECONOMY’

By Z.Ali Published: May 29, 2020

HYDERABAD: Locusts could cause a loss of more than Rs500 billion to the agricultural economy if not controlled, warned farmers lobbying group Sindh Abadgar Board (SAB) on Thursday.

The SAB, whose office-bearers and members held an online meeting to discuss the menace cutting a swathe through agricultural fields, urged the federal and Sindh governments to rise above their differences to deal with the pests.

“The concerns of the growers are increasing because of the lack of coordination between provinces and the federal government, their inaction and the absence of a clear strategy to control the locusts,” said a statement issued after the meeting. The farmers maintained that the cause of the unusual increase in locust swarms was essentially the lack of timely and effective control measures.

According to the SAB, which warned about a looming food security crisis in Pakistan, 38 per cent of the country’s area is favourable for locust breeding, especially following the monsoon rains.

“If not controlled, this [locust invasion] is going to be the last straw that will break the back of the rural economy that is already suffering under the impact of Covid-19. [Consequently] it will have a significant effect on the other sectors of Pakistan’s economy,” the farmers pointed out.

The SAB appealed to the federal and Sindh governments to set aside their political differences and develop a joint strategy to combat locusts.

“The window to effectively control locusts is narrow and it lies when they are in the desert for breeding,” said the statement, underlining the need for aerial spraying in regions inhabited by locust swarms as the most effective measure of killing the insects.

The SAB suggested that a team of experts, preferably local experts with knowledge and experience of eradicating locusts, should be formed. The government has also been asked to coordinate with Iran and India for formulating control measures.

Wheat procurement

The board further claimed that the Sindh government had been able to achieve only 40 per cent of its wheat procurement target 1.4 million tonnes, even as the harvest season neared its end in the province.

The procurement started in the first week of April whereas the harvest began near the end of February.

“It is difficult to comprehend why, at a time when there was limited transport due to the lockdown and a ban on the inter-district and inter-provincial movement of wheat, the provincial government wasn’t able to complete its target,” the board noted.

The farmers lamented that due to restrictions on the movement of wheat, the crop's price had slumped from Rs1,580 per 40 kilogrammes to a minimum of Rs1,275 and maximum of Rs1,350 in the open market.

The board also deplored the raids initiated by the Sindh government on farmers' wheat stock as well as the forceful confiscation of the stocks the government claimed were hoarded.

“It is important to note that 50 per cent of the population lives in rural areas and therefore about 30 per cent of the wheat production is retained by growers for their own consumption and seeds,” the SAB pointed out, asking Sindh Chief Minister Syed Murad Ali Shah to put an end to the confiscation of wheat stocks by the government.

Published in The Express Tribune, May 29th, 2020.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2230611/1-locusts-may-cause-loss-rs500b-economy/>

IN A FIRST, SHIP WITH FERTILISER FOR AFGHANISTAN BERTHS AT GWADAR PORT

Behram Baloch Updated May 30, 2020

GWADAR: A ship carrying 16,400 tonnes of DAP fertiliser for Afghanistan anchored at the Gwadar Port on Friday.

The ship brought fertiliser from Australia under the Pak-Afghan Transit Trade Agreement.

This is the first time Gwadar port is being used for import of urea by the Afghan government.

The chairman of Gwadar Port Authority, Naseer Ahmed Kashani, said that with the arrival of the urea-loaded ship, the Gwadar Port had been opened for Afghan transit trade.

“Another ship loaded with 16,000 tonnes of urea and 500,000 tonnes of sugar and wheat would reach the port next month,” Mr Kashani told Dawn, adding that urea consignment would be sent to Afghanistan by road.

The opening of Gwadar Port for Afghanistan's import and export of goods would create a lot of job opportunities for the people of Gwadar and Makran.

“We are happy to see start of trade activities at the Gwadar Port which will improve the living standard of the local people,” Muhammad Essa Baloch, who runs a small business in the area, said.

He said the opening of the port would also help the transport sector to flourish in the area and would provide jobs to the local people.

Published in Dawn, May 30th, 2020

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1560347/in-a-first-ship-with-fertiliser-for-afghanistan-berths-at-gwadar-port>

GOVERNMENT PROCURES 4.3M TONNES OF WHEAT

By Our Correspondent Published: May 30, 2020

LAHORE: Punjab Senior Minister Abdul Aleem Khan said that the Punjab Food Department has crossed the 4 million metric tonnes threshold of wheat procurement, which is the highest in the last 10 years.

He expressed these views while presiding over a meeting of the food department on Friday. Khan thanked the food department officials, district administration and law enforcement agencies for facilitating the record purchase.

“They worked day and night to meet the wheat procurement targets, stockpiled and curbed smuggling,” he highlighted. He promised that the food department would continue its efforts diligently and fulfill the assigned responsibilities with honesty.

It is estimated that the government currently holds a wheat stock of nearly 4.3 million metric tonnes, as per official sources. The Punjab government had set a target of 4.5 metric tonnes of wheat for the ongoing year.

As per the official records of the Punjab Food Department Bahawalpur, Lahore and Rawalpindi districts have generated surplus wheat against the assigned benchmark.

In meeting with the food department officials, he said that government would stop buying wheat and extend help to private flour mills to purchase the leftover wheat stock. Additionally, private seed companies will be supported buy wheat too.

He directed the authorities concerned to send a summary to the Punjab Chief Minister (CM) suggesting termination of wheat procurement operation at a government level as sufficient stock has been purchased from the farmers.

Aleem Khan also said the Punjab Seed Corporation has achieved 90% of the wheat procurement target.

“Nonetheless, the borders of Punjab would remain sealed,” he added.

The senior minister directed the food secretary to hold a meeting with flour mills association.

“The district administration would determine new flour price after holding consultations with the food department and flour mills,” he asserted.

Published in The Express Tribune, May 30th, 2020.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2231422/1-government-procures-4-3m-tonnes-wheat/#:~:text=It%20is%20estimated%20that%20the,wheat%20for%20the%20ongoing%20year.>

GOVERNMENT TURNS ITS GUNS ON RIVALS IN SUGAR SCAM

Syed Irfan Raza Updated May 28, 2020

ISLAMABAD: Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Accountability Mirza Shahzad Akbar addressing a press conference on Wednesday.—APP

ISLAMABAD: Just a week after the release of the forensic audit report that uncovered wrongdoings in sugar industry and implicated an erstwhile confidante of the prime minister among key political figures for last year’s sugar crisis, the government turned its guns on the main opposition party for giving the lion’s share in the Rs29 billion export subsidy to mill owners during the past five years.

“Ex-prime minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, who claims himself as the ‘most genius man’, had given Rs20 billion subsidy,” said Special Assistant to the PM on Accountability and Interior Ministry as well as chief of the Assets Recovery Unit (ARU) Shahzad Akbar while addressing a press conference on Wednesday.

Referring to the forensic audit, Mr Akbar said: “The inquiry commission was quite critical about the role of the ex-prime minister in giving subsidy to the sugar mafia during his tenure.

“The sugar commission’s report is an indictment against Ex-PM Abbasi and others.”

Reading out some findings of the commission, Mr Akbar said: “The commission is of the view that as per the documentary evidence available as discussed, the calculation of subsidy based on the cost of production in 2017-18 was not done with due diligence while approving the subsidy of Rs20 billion. Mr Shahid Khaqan Abbas could not provide [reasons].”

However, Mr Akbar exonerated the federal government of Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) in giving any subsidy on sugar in its tenure but only allowed to export the surplus sugar.

“The credit goes to the government of Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) which probed sugar scam, collected evidence, made the report public and now going to take corrective measures,” he said.

The inquiry commission, which was constituted by the government in the first week of April, released inquiry reports on the issue of artificial shortage of sugar in the country and sudden increase in their prices in 2019.

The PM’s aide, however, did not attempt to defend Chief Minister Usman Buzdar for giving Rs2.4 billion subsidy to the sugar mills last year. He said the food and agriculture secretary had admitted fault of the provincial government regarding the provision of export subsidy.

In response to a question, he said cases against all involved in the scam would be sent to relevant investigation departments such as National Accountability Bureau (NAB), Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) and Federal Board of Revenue (FBR). “Irrespective of their party affiliation, the government would take action against all culprits exposed in the investigation report of the commission,” he added.

The investigation found sugar production was historically more than the local requirement over the past few years and said it was therefore imperative to include this aspect related to sugar export, including any subsidy given, its impact on local prices and eventually major beneficiaries of such export subsidies, if any. The inquiry committee found the sugar export was not justified as sugarcane production was expected to be low in harvesting season 2018-19.

The commission in its report wrote about the subsidy given in 2017 by ex-PM Abbasi that on the basis of superficial calculations, a subsidy of more than Rs20 billion was allocated from the public exchequer to the sugar mills.

The PM’s aide also blamed Slaman Shahbaz, son of opposition leader Shahbaz Sharif, as a “facilitator” who by leading the “cartel” of Pakistan Sugar Mills Association (PSMA) convinced ex-PM Abbasi for giving subsidy of Rs20bn.

Mr Akbar said a fresh case against Shahbaz Sharif, PML-N president and leader of the opposition in the National Assembly, was ready to be filed by NAB and said although the opposition leader returned from London to lead the nation, he had self-quarantined himself allegedly to avoid appearance in the accountability court to face corruption charges against him. “No matter what Shahbaz Sharif would have to submit before the court of law in corruption cases against him,” he added.

Prime Minister Imran Khan will be briefed about the findings next week and he is likely to direct the National Accountability Bureau (NAB), Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), Security and Exchange Commission of Pakistan (SECP) and other relevant departments to file references in the court of law, in light of the commission’s report.

The PM’s aide said ex-PM Abbasi had given subsidy on sugar export when sugar price was quite high (\$577 per metric tonne) in international market. There was no justification of giving subsidy to the mill owners then, he argued. “If he (Mr Abbasi) was such a ‘genius’ he should have allowed import of entire stocks of surplus sugar in the country without giving any subsidy so that ample foreign exchange could be fetched,” he added.

Later, the PM’s aide also criticised the controversial role of government departments such as the SECP and Competition Commission of Pakistan for favouring mill owners in their wrongdoings.

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FOOD SECRETARY REMOVED OVER WHEAT, SUGAR CRISES MADE PPRA CHIEF

Agencies

May 31, 2020

ISLAMABAD: Federal Food Secretary Hashim Popalzai, who was removed over wheat and sugar crisis, has been reappointed as managing director of the public procurement regulatory authority (PPRA).

Sources said that the cabinet had approved Hashim Popalzai’s appointment summary through a circulation.

They said that Popalzai, who is retiring next year, has been appointed as MD of PPRA for three years before his retirement.

In April, Hashim Popalzai was removed as a secretary food by Prime Minister Imran Khan following a Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) inquiry report on wheat and sugar crisis.

Later, the prime minister had appointed Umar Hameed as a food secretary.

The FIA had declared Hashim Popalzai responsible for the wheat and sugar crisis and recommended his removal from the office.

<https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/665834-food-secretary-removed-over-wheat-sugar-crisis-made-ppra-chief>

US FOOD PRICES AT 46 YEARS HIGH

News Report

May 31, 2020

DES MOINES, Iowa: As if trips to the grocery store weren't nerve-wracking enough, US shoppers lately have seen the costs of meat, eggs and even potatoes soar as the coronavirus has disrupted processing plants and distribution networks, foreign media reported.

Overall, the cost of food bought to eat at home skyrocketed by the most in 46 years, and analysts caution that meat prices in particular could remain high as slaughterhouses struggle to maintain production levels while implementing procedures intended to keep workers healthy.

While price spikes for staples such as eggs and flour have eased as consumer demand has leveled off, prices remain volatile for carrots, potatoes and other produce because of transportation issues and the health of workers who pick crops and work in processing plants.

In short, supermarket customers and restaurant owners shouldn't expect prices to drop anytime soon.

"Our biggest concern is long-term food costs. I believe they will continue to go up," said Julie Kalambokidis, co-owner of Adriano's Brick Oven, a restaurant in Glenwood, Iowa.

Tamra Kennedy, who owns nine Mexican-inspired fast food franchises in Iowa and Minnesota, joined Kalambokidis on a call set up by Iowa US Rep Cindy Axne and said sometimes even getting essential ingredients is difficult.

"You can pick an ingredient and I can tell you there are shortages," she said.

Big fluctuations in food prices began in March, when the coronavirus pandemic began to sink in for US consumers.

The Labor Department reports that the 2.6% jump in April food prices was the largest monthly increase in 46 years. Prices for meats, poultry, fish and eggs increased the most, rising 4.3%. Although the 2.9% jump in cereals and bakery products wasn't as steep, it was still the largest increase the agency has recorded.

Dairy and related products, and fruits and vegetables increased by 1.5 percent in April.

Egg prices also reached an all-time record of more than \$3 a dozen in late March, but they have since fallen to less than \$1 a dozen.

The situation has been worse for meat prices, largely because of illnesses among slaughterhouse workers. The outbreaks struck pork processing plants the hardest, but beef and chicken processors also saw some impact as thousands of workers tested positive for the virus and the United Food and Commercial Workers union said at least 44 workers had died of COVID-19 as of Friday.

<https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/665835-us-food-prices-at-46-years-high>

NEWS COVERAGE PERIOD FROM MAY 11TH TO 17TH

DIESEL SHORTAGE, POL PRICES CUT MAY HAMPER WHEAT HARVESTING

Amjad Mahmood May 11, 2020

LAHORE: There seems to be no let-up in the miseries of the farmers as the authorities remain apathetic to the diesel shortage being faced by them in the middle of the wheat harvesting season.

Reports of unavailability of diesel in the market had started doing rounds a couple of days after downward revision of the rates of petroleum products on April 30 in line with the sharp decline in their prices in the world market.

Almost all oil marketing companies stopped placing orders with the international suppliers as soon as the Oil and Gas Regulatory Authority (Ogra) hinted at proposing a cut in oil prices.

Already suffering because of shortage of labour due to Covid-19 lockdown, wheat growers are facing another unexpected crisis amid the harvesting season in the form of unavailability of diesel to run their tractors and threshing machines. This may lead to delay in harvesting.

Farmers riding their tractor-trolleys and pick-ups carrying barrels and jerry cans can be seen queuing up at the filling stations to get diesel, particularly in Bhakkar, Layyah and Mianwali districts of Punjab. In most cases, they return empty-handed or get a few litres of diesel.

“At a time when I should have been in my lands to oversee wheat harvesting, I’m forced to line up at petrol pumps to get diesel for my tractor-run thresher,” laments Rana Haider, a farmer from Thal area in Bhakkar.

Talking to Dawn by phone, he says that he has lost his three precious days in search of diesel but failed to find the product and he is paying rent for the threshing machine without using it.

Saeed Baloch, a petrol pump owner in Mianwali, claims the oil marketing companies have introduced quota regimes since April 30 for the first time on the basis of average calculated on the yearly basis and thus are providing them one-fourth of the supplies against the demand.

The companies are also delaying the supplies contrary to their normal routines, he alleges, explaining that he would get oil supply the next day of placing the order. But, since the recent cut in prices, this gap between placement of order and supplies has widened to the minimum four days, creating a severe shortage particularly of diesel, he adds.

He wonders why the government didn’t manage the situation while the state-run Pakistan State Oil had flagged the issued in the first week of May.

An official of the PSO Lahore region alleges that the private oil marketing companies (OMCs) are not supplying petroleum products to their respective dealers and thus the whole pressure has been diverted to the PSO outlets. He says that his entity is supplying one million litres of diesel daily only in Lahore region to meet the wheat harvesting-related demand.

A petroleum dealer, Rehmat Khan Wardag, says OMCs have not placed orders for the import of petroleum products since the recent cut in oil prices. He says the OMCs suffered billions of rupees losses in the process and fears that the volatile situation in the world markets will keep them away from the business in coming weeks, which may lead to severe shortage of oil, particularly diesel, in the local market.

He has urged the government to import oil on its own without delay to fend off the hovering shortage that may plunge the sectors dependent on diesel, particularly the agriculture sector, into a severe crisis.

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FOOD OFFICIAL MANHANDLED BY TOWN COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN FOR INTERCEPTING WHEAT STOCK

Dawn Report May 11, 2020

UMERKOT: Harassment and manhandling of a food department official by Samaro town committee chairman late on Saturday evening sent a wave of anger among food officials across the town. An emergency meeting of senior food officials was held on Sunday to condemn the incident.

It was gathered that food inspector Iftikhar Arain, along with a police team, intercepted a consignment of 1,200 wheat bags of 40-kg each while it was being transported by two trucks to some other district. The action was taken as part of the ongoing campaign against hoarding/illegal movement of wheat stocks which was causing an artificial shortage of the commodity and wheat flour in the province.

According to Mr Arain, when he impounded one truck-load of wheat and chased the other truck, Samaro town committee chairman, Rafique Ahmed Qaimkhani, who belonged to the ruling Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), along with some other persons intervened and harassed him to deter him from discharging his official duty. "Qaimkhani abused and held me hostage for some time and then slapped me when I did not agree to come to his terms," alleged Mr Arain.

He said he intended to recover more than 14,000 other wheat bags hoarded in his area of operation to prevent the stocks from being shifted to some other district/province in violation of the relevant ban imposed by the provincial government.

Escorted by a police force, the officials recovered more than 1,00,000 wheat bags and sealed off the mills.

Reacting angrily to the incident, senior food officials held a meeting under the chairmanship of Mohammed Hussain Mahar to discuss the issue. Ghulam Nabi Soomro, Iftikhar Arain and other senior officials including heads of all procurement centres in the district attended the meeting.

The meeting condemned the town committee chairman's act of hooliganism as unacceptable. It said Qaimkhani's attempt of obstructing the food official from performing his duty was unlawful. Appropriate action must be taken against him and those who accompanied him in this unlawful act, it added.

The meeting participants said no one was above the law and, as such, could not be allowed to stop any official from performing duty in line with the orders issued by government.

They resolved to stop performing their official duties pertaining to wheat procurement if action was not taken against the offenders.

SUKKUR: Raids were conducted in three flour mills in the Salehpat town as the drive against hoarders of wheat continued in Sukkur district, food officials said on Saturday.

In Jacobabad, district food controller Asghar Soomro along with Assistant Commissioner of Garhi Khero Sanaullah Bhatti carried out a raid on a rice mill in Dao Jahanpur on the orders of Deputy Commissioner Ghazanfar Ali Qadri.

NAUSHAHRO FEROUZE: District food controller Qareebullah Soomro said on Saturday that around 145,500 wheat bags were recovered in raids on several godowns in grain markets of Bhiriya Road, Kandiaro, Mehrabpur and Khan Wahan towns.

The raiding team found more than 20,000 wheat bags clandestinely stocked there. The stocks were seized and the rice mill was sealed, the officials said.

He told local reporters around 40,000 wheat bags were recovered in Khan Wahan, 35,000 in Mehrabpur, 11,500 in Kandiaro and 60,000 in Bhiriya Road.

All the godowns were sealed, he added.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556097/food-official-manhandled-by-town-committee-chairman-for-intercepting-wheat-stock>

SUKKUR NAB READIES FOUR REFERENCES ON WHEAT SCAM

The Newspaper's Correspondent May 11, 2020

SUKKUR: The Sukkur region of the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) has prepared four references concerning misappropriation of billions of rupees worth of wheat in food department and is ready to file them in accountability court, according to sources.

Sources in the NAB said the references would be filed after seeking formal approval of the bureau's chairman. In this connection, a meeting of NAB's regional board presided over by its Sukkur director general reviewed the scam in Sukkur, Larkana and Shaheed Benazirabad divisions and accorded approval to the references prepared against the corrupt officials of food department.

The sources said the NAB chairman himself had issued directives to file the references over growing complaints about large-scale corruption in food department in different districts of the province.

The sources said that a reference accused deputy director food Anees-ur-Rehman Mahar, district food controller Mohammad Iqbal Memon and others of Rs128 million corruption and another reference blamed Khairpur district food controller Mohammad Ali Ujjan and others of more than Rs58m graft in the stored grain.

The third reference accused Larkana district food controller Zahid Ali Unnar and others of Rs870m corruption and the fourth blamed Kandhkot-Kashmore's deputy director of food Fazal Mohammad Bhangwar and others of more than Rs74m graft.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556096/sukkur-nab-readies-four-references-on-wheat-scam>

IT'S A SEASON OF MANGOES AND COVID-19

Mohammad Hussain Khan May 11, 2020

THE season of the king of fruits — mangoes — has started. But this year, it starts amidst serious concerns of coronavirus spreading in Sindh's rural areas since thousands of labourers arrive from South Punjab, mainly Muzaffargarh. Under the current circumstances, allowing them to enter Sindh is risky since this may allow the contagion to spread in rural areas which, by and large, have remained safe compared with urban areas.

To harvest mangoes, big orchard owners let out their farms to contractors. Punjab's labourers – hired by the orchard contractors – have begun to arrive in Sindh's mango farms, which are larger, through different means of transport, while consignments from these farms have started reaching Punjab.

Till May 7, the Sindh government was debating standard operating procedures (SOPs) to let these workers enter the province. Draft SOPs have been presented to the Sindh government by Sharjeel Inam Memon, an orchard owner who is a Sindh Assembly member from Hyderabad's rural area. He had raised this issue of Punjab's labourers with the government as they turned up in thousands.

“I have discussed SOPs with the Sindh chief minister and he has not yet finalised them. We are trying to see the situation is handled adroitly,” says Mr Memon, an influential member of Sindh's ruling party.

Among other measures, the 11-point draft recommends that growers/contractors provide a list of workers from other provinces. It also states enrollment forms will have to be filled and submitted before revenue officials within five working days of labourers commencing work. Items such as gloves, masks and hand sanitisers have to be provided to those working along the entire mango value chain.

Every grower has to try to engage the maximum number of local labourers and minimise hiring from elsewhere for plucking and packing purposes. If a worker develops Covid-19 symptoms, he has to be sent for a checkup. A proforma has to be filled by each worker for tracking and tracing purposes.

‘There is no rocket science involved which would prevent local labour from learning to pluck or pack mangoes. Previously, nobody thought of departing from the conventional practice of labour coming in from Punjab to Sindh because there was no reason for it’

The Sindh government is continuously resisting pressure from the PTI-led federal government, as well as the business community, to ease the lockdown. The chief minister had even differed, rightly so, with the 20-point SOPs mutually agreed between the ulema and President Arif Alvi on Taraweeh prayers in Ramazan to stem the spread of the contagion. He feared the SOPs will not be implementable therefore sought to restrict prayer congregations.

Currently, Sindh health officials dealing with the Covid-19 situation and pandemic trajectory believe May is going to be tough from the point of view of a spike in the number of cases. “We are bracing for an exponential rise in cases if the lockdown is eased,” observes a Sindh health official associated with monitoring the Covid-19 situation. “The impact of the decision taken for opening up of businesses will be seen after a fortnight,” he asserted.

Labourers have already started to arrive unchecked in Sindh from Punjab where an upward trend in the number of cases can be seen, and more are on their way. It is a foregone conclusion that the SOPs specific to mango workers will not be doable, any more than those that were drafted for prayer congregations.

“I think this is an opportunity that can bring local labourers forward and help overcome unemployment currently seen in the pandemic’s backdrop,” says Sindh agriculture minister Ismail Rahu, who is the son of hari leader Fazil Rahu. The real issue, he opines, pertains to big farms that are let out to contractors who hire workers from Punjab. “One expert worker brought from Punjab for each farm should be enough, the rest should be purely local labourers to handle the mango crop this season. This is how they will get trained as well,” he remarks.

The issue of workers from Punjab coming to Sindh has surfaced for the first time because of the pandemic, otherwise, it was conventional practice for orchard owners and contractors. Locally known as bharawa and thukawa, labour from Punjab has picked, sorted and packed mangoes with dexterity for years.

The contractors’ argument is since available local labour is not trained, engaging them would cause mango wastage and result in monetary losses. Therefore, this issue is more of contractors than of orchard owners.

Labour from Punjab arrives in groups of 40-50 people. Depending on the size of an orchard, multiple teams work together, switching from one farm to another if need be. They stay at farms and leave once the season is finished, awaiting the arrival of kinnow season in Punjab.

“There is no rocket science involved which would prevent local labour from learning to pluck or pack mangoes. Nobody thought of departing from conventional practice before because there was no reason for it,” remarks Sindh Abadgar Board vice president Mahmood Nawaz Shah, who is also an owner of mango orchards and an exporter. To quote a medium-sized mango grower Nadeem Shah, Punjab’s labour is cheap as well as trained.

The Sindh government remained worried till all the men from Tableeghi Jamaat – who became virus carriers in the province in March – recovered and were repatriated home. The government’s efforts to ensure safe transportation was praised. Given its lockdown policy, it is unlikely that the Murad Shah-led government will have two different standards relating to the same emergency.

While things are challenging this year, it is an opportunity to engage local labour so that they get trained and there is less reliance on workers from another province next season. It would not be difficult for the locals to learn the art of sorting and plucking since they work in the fields all year round. Is saving mangoes more important than saving lives?

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AGRICULTURAL HARDSHIP UNDER LOCKDOWN

Amjad Mahmood Updated May 11, 2020

THE agriculture sector is facing one of its biggest crises. On one hand, erratic weather and the resultant untimely heavy rains and hailstorms, coupled with the locust attack, are making it hard for farmers to sleep at night. On the other hand, the lockdown since mid-March has created many challenges and negatively impacted the rural population in general and small farm holders in particular.

The prolonged shutdown across the country has not only reduced on-farms activities but also disturbed the transport and sale of crops, vegetables and fruits, as well as the purchase of farm inputs.

Livestock, the most important sub-sector which contributes around 60 per cent of agriculture’s share to GDP, is the major victim of the Covid-19 outbreak. To meet their day-to-day expenses, small farmers rear milch cattle and sell the milk.

Closure of tea-stalls, sweets shops and the reduced timing for milk shops under the lockdown's standard operating procedures (SOPs) shrank demand for this highly perishable commodity and thus cut its rates.

Salahuddin, a smallholder farmer from Narang Mandi town near Lahore, says he gets 72 litres of milk from his nine buffaloes. Before the lockdown, the milkman would give him Rs80 per litre but now is not willing to buy at even Rs50 per litre citing hurdles in the onward sale because of virus issues. Likewise, owner of a known sweet shop in Mian Channu (Khanewal) has his own dairy farm but since he is disallowed to open his business because of the lockdown, he is forced to sell milk at Rs40 per litre in the town, says Pakistan Kissan Ittehad general secretary Mian Umair, who belongs to the area.

Some dairy farmers are turning towards value addition in the form of mozzarella cheese and ghee to prolong milk's shelf life rather than sell it at throwaway prices

Initially suffering at the hands of the milkman, Mr Salahuddin is now trying to find a solution through value addition: he is preparing (mozzarella quality) cheese and trying to sell it online. Even if he doesn't manage to find buyers, this will enhance the shelf life of the milk. Similarly, some dairy farmers are making desi ghee out of milk instead of selling the commodity at throwaway prices.

Closure of hotels and the ban on weddings and parties is also hurting the once thriving poultry sector. Vegetables are also being sold at low rates in the wholesale market though end consumers are not benefitting from the low prices as the middlemen are making a killer profit.

"The first month of the lockdown was particularly difficult for farmers as delinked from the markets, they had to sell their dairy and farm products at throwaway prices," says Farooq Tariq, general secretary of Pakistan Kissan Rabita Committee, a representative of smallholder farmers. "Those engaged in producing horticulture, floriculture and dairy farming were shattered with the losses for being forced to market their commodities at whatever rate offered in the local bazaar."

Hanf Hanjra, a horticulturist from Sargodha, says previously he earned a good living during the wedding and Ramazan seasons by dispatching his produce to big markets like Lahore and Gujranwala. "However, this time I'm hardly able to meet my expenses because I'm forced to sell my farm produce in the local market at much lower rates as either transport to far-off markets is not available or its charges are unaffordable." He claims he could not once cover transport charges even for the Sargodha market where his four maunds (around 160kg) of coriander was sold for just Rs70 in wholesale.

Unfortunately, the harvesting season of wheat, politically the most important crop, has also fallen in this time of social distancing. The already scarce manual labour has been further reduced because of mobility issues in the wake of the pandemic. And this gap in demand and supply has pushed up wages of available farmworkers.

"Labour is costlier this year as workers face problems crossing police check-posts erected to curtail the movement of people," says Mian Umair. Previously, he would pay 160kg per acre of wheat to a worker for reaping his crop and now this rate has gone up to 210kg per acre. Facing issues trying to convince the mostly illiterate labour force to observe social distancing rules, he says he had to hire manpower from as far as Kasur district, more than 200km away from Mian Channu.

The farming sector was also hit because of difficulties in obtaining inputs and the shutdown of agriculture-engineering and allied industries. Though the government has permitted auto workshops to function when the wheat harvesting season sets in, the decision to allow shops of lath machines, spare parts, etc came a bit late in the day and farmers could not get their tractors, tube-wells and allied machines repaired in time. There were also difficulties in procuring medicine for cattle, bemoans Mr Salah.

Mr Tariq regrets that small farmers, one of the hardest-hit class by the lockdown, are not being considered for compensation by the government. He fears that this will lead to the compounding of rural poverty, disabling particularly the landless farmers from the purchase of seed and other farm inputs for the next crop.

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QCCI BACKS FLOUR MILLERS' DEMAND

CORRESPONDENT May 11, 2020

QUETTA. Quetta Chamber of Commerce and Industry backed Pakistan Flour Mills Association's demand of lifting inter-district ban on the transportation of wheat in the name of coronavirus lockdown. "Section 144 is imposed across Balochistan to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

However, the ban on inter-district transportation on wheat could cause food shortage in the province," said QCCI Senior Vice President Badaruddin Kakar in a statement issued on Saturday. Kakar accused the provincial government and food department of deliberately causing wheat turmoil in Balochistan to ruin the provincial flour mill industry.

"Naseerabad, Jhal Magsi and Jaffar districts fulfill wheat requirements of other districts of the province. Despite the fact, Balochistan government making any policy and strategy," said the QCCI senior vice president in the statement.

He alleged the provincial government for attempting to create wheat shortage to increase flour prices across the province. Criticising wheat procurement policy of the government, Kakar said, "Balochistan produces 80 to 90 million sacks of wheat in a year but the government announced to procure only one million sacks which will ruin the flour mills business in the province.

https://epaper.tribune.com.pk/DisplayDetails.aspx?ENI_ID=11202005110209&EN_ID=11202005110063&EMID=11202005110030

PAKISTAN'S SUGAR POLICY NEEDS REFORMS

By HARI LOHANO Published: May 11, 2020

KARACHI: In the midst of the coronavirus crisis, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government has released the probe commission report on the misuse of sugar and wheat subsidies in the country.

The report shows the power and influence of sugar barons in relation to the country's policy-making. Most of the names mentioned in the report are close associates of the PM, the PTI and the ministers in the government.

PM Imran deserves much credit for the release of the report. He has promised to take decisive action after the probe commission submits its final recommendations.

Findings of the report raise crucial questions about the government's sugar policy and the transparency of its economic policy. How does the sugar policy work? How sugar subsidy benefits only the sugar industry?

Sugarcane is a high-value, rich farmer's crop due its special characteristics. Its per-acre expenses are much higher than any other cash crop.

The time from planting to harvesting is longer. Its marketing chain, from buying seed to arranging tractor trollies for transporting it to sugar mills, negotiating price and finally getting payment, involves very lengthy processes. This favours the rich and better-off farmers as against the cash-starved small landowners.

Pakistan is among the top 10 sugarcane producing countries in the world, with plantations over a million hectares. Sugarcane production accounts for nearly two-thirds of the area in Punjab and a quarter in Sindh.

It uses more of the subsidised agricultural inputs, especially fertiliser and water, than any other crop in the economy. In a highly water-stressed country like Pakistan, sugarcane uses a much higher quantity of water than any other crop.

Between 2013-14 and 2017-18, according to the Economic Survey of Pakistan, the production of sugarcane increased by an impressive 24%, from 67 to 83 million tonnes.

During this period, the area where sugarcane was cultivated increased by 14% from 1.17 to 1.34 million hectares. The average yield per hectare, rising from 57 to 62 tonnes, shows an increase of only 8%.

The area under sugarcane cultivation in Pakistan is the fifth largest in the world after Brazil, India, China and Thailand. Its per-hectare yield, however, is much lower than the other major producers.

Its yield of 62 tonnes per hectare in 2018 was well below the world average of 73 tonnes and even below India's yield of 80 tonnes.

Figures for last year's crop (2018-19), compared with the average performance of crops in the previous five years, showed a decline of 9% in sugarcane cultivation and 6% in production. This decline is mainly attributed to late payments to farmers, shortage of water and an uncertain political environment during the 2018 election.

As in production, Pakistan is among the top 10 countries in consumption of sugar in the world and the biggest consumer of sugar in South Asia. Consumption of sugar is over 25 kg per person per year in Pakistan. In India, it is 20 kg and in China 11 kg.

Pakistan has 89 sugar mills, a much higher number than needed for domestic requirement. Some of these are located in regions where they are economically unviable and environmentally unsuitable.

Most of these mills are owned by very influential and powerful families. They belong to the governing party, the main opposition parties and the families of former generals.

At the time of Independence in 1947, there were only two sugar mills in the country. Until 1970, there were only four.

The mushroom growth of the mills was mainly during General Zia's period of office (1977-1988), when state patronage was provided to create a new business and political class to counter political opposition to his dictatorial rule. Since then, all the major political parties have followed this path and expanded it.

This growth of the sugar industry has had a very adverse effect on the country's other climatically suitable cash crop, cotton, which has been the backbone of the agriculture sector and a major source of foreign currency reserves for the country.

Between 2013-14 and 2017-18, the area under cotton cultivation declined by 4% and its production by 6%. More strikingly, when 2018-19 is compared with the average performance of the crop in the previous five years, its cultivation area has declined by 17% and production fell by two million bales or 20%.

The pricing policy for sugarcane and sugar is based on government intervention in the market through huge public subsidies, direct and indirect, at various levels of production and sale of the commodity.

At the time of harvesting the crop, the government announces a guaranteed minimum price for sugarcane, to encourage farmers to increase the area under cultivation. The government even decides about the movement of the crop – to ensure that sugar mill owners receive plenty of the produce to keep their business viable.

To protect the sugar industry further, the government imposes higher tariffs on sugar imports to “stabilise” prices in the domestic market. In general, the domestic price for sugar remains much higher than the average world price.

In addition, the government provides an export subsidy on sugar in the name of increasing foreign currency reserves.

The government’s decision in September 2018 to allow export of sugar, despite early indications of low production in the country, was a continuation of past public policy to protect the industry.

Pakistan exported 0.4 million tonnes of sugar in 2016-17 and 1.6 million tonnes in 2017-18. Moreover, in 2017, during the period of Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) government, the sugar export quota was increased from 0.5 to 2 million tonnes.

There are two prices for refined sugar in the domestic market. One is the ex-mill price, which is the wholesale price at which the mill sells its product to traders and shopkeepers. The other is the retail price of sugar sold to customers at local corner shops and supermarkets – the price paid by common consumers.

The decision to export the commodity caused a hike in both these prices. The ex-mill price increased from Rs52 to Rs54 per kg in January 2019. The retail price, however, increased from Rs56 to Rs59, a rise of 6%.

With the increasing exports, prices increased regularly for domestic consumers. Even after the ban on sugar exports in February, prices remain on the higher side.

Between December 2019 and March 2020, the ex-mill price for sugar increased by 39% to Rs72. In the same period, the retail price increased by 33% to Rs80.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)’s April 2020 report also mentions that wholesale prices for sugar in Pakistan were over 50% higher in March than the international prices.

The sugar industry has benefitted enormously from the government’s policy. In addition to the export subsidy of Rs3 billion by the Punjab government, the sugar mill owners have received extra profit to the extent of Rs85 billion – Rs5.7 billion per month from January 2019 to the end of March 2020.

The above discussion demonstrates that the government’s sugar policy distorts the local market. This harms poor the most and inflicts huge costs on the domestic economy. The only beneficiary is the influential and powerful sugar industry.

At the time of pandemic and huge risks to economy, the government should refrain from intervening in the sugar market and consider reforms in the industry through parliamentary procedures and democratic practices.

In this hour of economic crisis, the government should focus more on the protection of poor and welfare of society through the provision of public goods like healthcare and strengthen the social safety nets.

The writer is a PhD from the UK and writes for The Guardian as well

HAILSTORM DAMAGES WHEAT CROP, ORCHARDS IN BAJAUR

The Newspaper's Correspondent Updated May 12, 2020

KHAR: Rain coupled with hailstorm damaged standing wheat crop, vegetables and orchards in Mamond tehsil of Bajaur tribal district, residents and officials said on Monday.

They said that hailstorm accompanied by rain started just after Iftari and lasted for about one hour.

They said that Dabar, Badan, Shah Goo, Shahi Thangi, Mokha, Kalpanim Kaga, Sewai and other hilly areas were the worst affected.

Local residents told this correspondent that hailstones were very large in size, severely damaging the standing crop of wheat, vegetables and orchards in the region.

They said that the growers were expecting good harvest of wheat crop this year, but hailstones largely damaged it.

District agriculture officer Ziaul Islam Dawar told Dawn that the hailstorm caused extensive damage to wheat crop and vegetables in Mamond tehsil.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556473/hailstorm-damages-wheat-crop-orchards-in-bajaur>

33,000 TONS OF WHEAT RECOVERED DURING RAIDS: MINISTER

By RECORDER REPORT on May 12, 2020

The Punjab Food Department has so far recovered 33,130 tons of stored wheat by raiding 436 storage places in different districts of the province.

The recovered wheat has been seized and action is being taken against the accused under the law, said Senior Minister Punjab Abdul Aleem Khan here on Monday.

The minister said that strict action was being taken against wheat stockpiling across the province and crackdown was being carried out indiscriminately against the elements involved in this heinous crime.

In a briefing session of the food department, Aleem Khan said that for the last two weeks, strict checks were being carried out on the land and river routes of Punjab where smuggling of wheat had been curtailed with the help of the intelligence agencies and Rangers.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/12/596146/three-3000-tons-of-wheat-recovered-during-raids-minister/>

KHARIF SEASON PADDY TO BE SOWN OVER 4.618M ACRES IN PUNJAB

RECORDER REPORT May 12, 2020

SIALKOT: More than 4.618 million acres of land would be brought under paddy crop during Kharif season in various rice growing areas of the Punjab.

Sources in Agriculture department told Business Recorder on Monday that the department had chalked out a well-knitted training programme to create awareness among the growers about the use of recommended seed and proper use of fertilizer to attain the fixed target in Punjab.

In this regard, the department deputed special training teams which were visiting various villages for providing proper guidance and assistance about the use of inputs, nursery sowing and transfer of plants into fields to the rice growers in the Punjab.

In Sialkot district, paddy will be cultivated on 317030 acres of land in Sialkot, Daska, Pasrur and Sambrial tehsils during Kharif season. The paddy would be sown on 91083 acres in Sialkot, 78053 acres in Daska, 103098 acres in Pasrur and 44796 acres in Sambrial tehsils of Sialkot district. Local agriculture department had initiated farmers training programme in 1442 villages of Sialkot, Daska, Pasrur and Sambrial tehsils of Sialkot district. Special training teams were busy to empower rice growers for enhancing per acre yield, sowing of paddy nurseries, utilization of irrigation water, pesticides and fertilizer as well as about the different varieties of paddy in Sialkot district, the sources added.

Some progressive farmers were adopting modern technology for raising rice nursery by automatic machine in plastic trays at local agriculture farm and ready for transplanting by 'Rice Trans Planter' in Bajwat area of Sialkot.

<https://epaper.brecorder.com/2020/05/12/10-page/836745-news.html>

TRADING ACTIVITIES RESUME ON COTTON MARKET

By RECORDER REPORT on May 12, 2020

Trading activities resume on the cotton market on Monday after the closure of more than one and a half months due to the coronavirus lockdown.

Market sources said that traders are hopeful that situation will be improved gradually after the softening of the lockdown by the government.

Cotton analyst Naseem Usman told that both federal and provincial governments should take steps to save the cotton crop from the locust attack. The recent report of Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations warned of a potentially serious food security crisis this year in several regional countries, including Pakistan, due to locust attacks.

It is expected that Pakistan's Rabi and Kharif crops will be badly affected by locust attack. According to the estimates Pakistan's economy has to bear the loss of Rs 669 billion due to the locust attack during the current year.

Naseem Usman said that Spot Rate Committee of Karachi Cotton Association has stabled the spot rate at Rs 8600 per maund. The rate of cotton in Sindh and Punjab is in between Rs 7000 to Rs 8600 per maund. The rate of polyester fiber was decreased by Rs 3 per kg and was available at Rs 157 per kg.

<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/12/596129/trading-activities-resume-on-cotton-market/>

K-P CHALKS OUT STRATEGY TO BATTLE LOCUSTS

By Our Correspondent Published: May 12, 2020

PESHAWAR: After crops in multiple districts were ravaged by locusts, the provincial government on Monday said that it has prepared an inclusive strategy for tackling the pests.

Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (K-P) Minister for Agriculture and Livestock, Mohibullah Khan on Monday presided over a meeting to review the agriculture department's response to battling swarms of locusts.

Agriculture Secretary Israr Khan, Agriculture Extension Director-General Abid Kamal and other senior officials attended the meeting.

The provincial agriculture minister was briefed on the presence of locusts and measures to control it.

The minister was told that teams have been formed at the district level where locust swarms are present.

At least 25,833 acres of land has been sprayed with insecticides in 15 districts of the province to control the locusts, the minister was told.

To further control the roving swarms of locusts, Mohibullah was told that aerial spray will also be conducted.

The locusts entered K-P through Sherani, Mosakhel and Zhobs districts of Balochistan on January 25 this year and since then have spread to several southern districts of the province.

As a result, the provincial government had been forced to impose an emergency in all locust-hit districts of K-P on January 28. The emergency was later extended to other districts of the province which were affected by locusts.

Published in The Express Tribune, May 12th, 2020.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2219416/1-k-p-chalks-strategy-battle-locusts/>

CS ORDERS GOVT DEPTS TO COLLABORATE TO COMBAT LOCUSTS

By APP Published: May 12, 2020

LAHORE: Punjab Chief Secretary Jawwad Rafique Malik on Monday directed the departments concerned to work collectively on scientific lines to combat locust. "These departments include Provincial Disaster Management Authority (PDMA), Agriculture, Livestock and Forest."

He expressed these views while presiding over a meeting to review steps to control locust in the province. Senior Member Board of Revenue (SMBR) Babar Hayat Tarar, Agriculture secretary, PDMA director general and senior army officers attended the meeting.

The SMBR told the meeting that 150 vehicles and 260 motorcycle were being used for spray in locust-affected areas and so far 114,406 hectares of land had been covered.

As many as 760 solo power were also being utilized for carrying out spray, he added. He further said that a working group headed by SMBR and comprising secretaries of different departments including Finance, Agriculture, Livestock and Forest was supervising the situation.

Similarly, a core committee consisting of Agriculture DG, PDMA DG, representatives of army and Cholistan Development Authority was working against the pest.

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<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2219454/1-cs-orders-govt-depts-collaborate-combat-locusts/>

ECC READY TO APPROVE FARM PACKAGE

By Zafar Bhutta Published: May 12, 2020

ISLAMABAD: The Economic Coordination Committee (ECC), which is scheduled to meet on Wednesday, is set to approve a Rs56-billion bailout package for the agriculture sector amid the growing impact of Covid-19 pandemic.

The government has already announced a stimulus package of over Rs1.2 trillion to cushion the impact of Covid-19. Out of this, Rs100 billion has been earmarked for giving relief to small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and the agriculture sector.

The Ministry of National Food Security and Research has prepared a package of incentives for farmers in various sub-sectors of the agriculture sector to help them to cope with the impact of Covid-19. The ministry has submitted its proposals for ECC's consideration.

The food security ministry has proposed a subsidy of Rs925 per bag of di-ammonium phosphate (DAP) and other phosphoric fertilisers and Rs243 per bag of urea and other nitrogen fertilisers. Total subsidy cost will be Rs37 billion.

Agrarian dilemma: Is the smart subsidy really smart for Pakistani farmers?

The subsidy scheme will be implemented by the provinces and funds will be disbursed through the scratch card scheme, already being implemented by Punjab. The subsidy on fertilisers has been proposed for the Kharif crop (April-October).

At present, the government gives subsidy to fertiliser manufacturers on gas supply that is said to be not fully passed on to consumers. This time, the government has decided to give a direct subsidy to the farmers.

Farmers have been facing high-interest rates of up to 18.4% on bank loans. This has been a major problem that has caused losses to them over the past few years as they cannot add adequate inputs to crops.

Now, the government has decided to reduce the mark-up on loans. However, the proposed rate of interest is still high that the farmers may not be able to afford.

At present, the mark-up on agricultural loans provided by Zarai Taraqiati Bank Limited is 18.4%. A reduction to 10% has been proposed for 2020 for ECC's approval. The mark-up subsidy will require Rs8.8 billion.

A subsidy of Rs150 per kg of cottonseed has been recommended for the Kharif 2020 crop season in Punjab and Sindh. This subsidy will require an amount of Rs2.3 billion.

Another subsidy of Rs300 per bag of pesticides, meant for combating white fly, has been proposed. The subsidy will cover five million acres in Punjab and Sindh, which is around 80% of the cotton area. The total cost of the subsidy will be Rs6 billion.

The food security ministry has proposed 5% sales tax subsidy on locally manufactured tractors for one year. The total cost of the subsidy will be Rs2.5 billion. Sources said the finance ministry had endorsed the subsidy for the agriculture sector.

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<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2219479/2-ecc-ready-approve-farm-package/>

CHICKEN PRICES SHOOT UP

Aamir Shafaat Khan May 13, 2020

KARACHI: Retailers have raised the prices of chicken beyond the reach of many people as the live bird is selling at Rs230-240 per kg and meat at Rs350-400 per kg, showing an increase of Rs70-80 a kilo over the past few days.

Surprisingly, the official rate of live bird and its meat is Rs138 and Rs214 per kg but shopkeepers have neither displayed the price list, nor are they selling the bird at the control rate.

Poultry retailers are demanding Rs600 for boneless chicken as compared to Rs500 per kg.

Poultry traders say that prices usually crash on low demand and soar on high demand, but here they link the price hike to a short supply of birds from farms.

General secretary of the Sindh Poultry Wholesalers and Retailers Association Kamal Akhtar Siddiqui said in last week of March, poultry industry had warned consumers regarding price hike in coming months because farmers were not putting day-old chicks at their farms owing to massive decline in sale due to closure of wedding halls, restaurants, hotels, barbecues, etc, during the lockdown which was imposed in third week of March to control spread of coronavirus.

He said wholesale price of live bird had risen to Rs210 from Rs140 and meat to Rs367 from Rs245 per kg.

“Despite price hike, poultry is still cheaper when compared with veal meat prices of Rs600-700 per kg (with and without bones) and mutton at Rs1,200 per kg,” he said adding that even good quality fish was selling at Rs700 per kg.

The government had allowed online sale of food during limited hours slightly offsetting the negative impact of low chicken sale to some extent.

A number of people prefer to make chicken-related dishes at home rather than taking risk of ordering online food in view of lingering coronavirus threat.

Consumers are now paying the price of huge losses of poultry sector’s declining sales in March and April and the government’s price control machinery does not exist to rescue consumers, some observers said.

The government has remained focused towards dealing with the opening of different trades and finalising standard operating procedures (SOPs) for various industries since the start of lockdown.

However, with or without price list, stakeholders had continued to challenge the government’s writ in selling products on their own terms.

There is literally no fear among shopkeepers, wholesalers and product manufacturers to face any strict action like heavy fines or imprisonment against price hike, the observers added.

The Pakistan Poultry Association (PPA) in last week of March said that hatcheries had stopped setting eggs for chick production amid depressed sales.

Egg layers had also been culled, which was already showing signs of short supply of eggs.

Broiler breeders, which were consuming feed, had been sold at throwaway prices for meat.

From the above situation, birds supply in the markets would remain in short supply in coming months.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556656/chicken-prices-shoot-up>

RAHU REITERATES NEED FOR CENTRE'S HELP TO KEEP LOCUSTS AT BAY

The Newspaper's Staff Correspondent May 13, 2020

HYDERABAD: Sindh Minister for Agriculture Ismail Rahu has apprehended that locusts currently present in many districts of the province could cause heavy damage to the agriculture sector if not eliminated before rainfall.

“It’s the most dangerous enemy we are faced with after Covid-19,” he remarked while chairing a meeting of agriculture extension officials and later addressing a press conference at Shahbaz Hall here on Tuesday.

Mr Rahu was of the view that locusts would inflict a heavy loss to agricultural produce in Sindh and Punjab in the next few months as monsoon was approaching. The loss would ultimately cause food insecurity on a large scale, he added.

“It’s a major issue as the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and other international forums have already warned that locusts could attack Pakistan 10 times this year,” the minister said.

He told the meeting that the federal government should help Sindh carry out aerial spray to eliminate locusts’ swarms that had already devoured standing crops and green patches in many districts and were a potential threat to remaining agricultural fields in Sindh.

He noted that the swarms were constantly attacking certain districts over the past two months.

He recalled that the federal government had declared a ‘national emergency’ in January this year and prepared a national action plan to deal with the menace in three phases. “The first phase is near completion but no significant success has been achieved so far,” he pointed out, and regretted that no effective action was being taken while only meetings after meetings on the issue were being held.

The minister quoted surveys, conducted by some international organisations, suggesting that 300,000 square kilometre area of Pakistan could come under locust attack. The areas identified in the surveys were 50pc of Balochistan, 35pc of Sindh and 15pc of Punjab. “This means that 100,000sq-km area is vulnerable and 50,000sq-km area has already come under attack or threatened by the swarms existing in Sindh,” he said.

He, however, noted that this time, locusts swarms in Sindh appeared to be in transition and that was why they did not cause a huge loss to crops but during and after rainfall, they would definitely pose a serious threat to farmlands in the province. “The swarms are flying towards India but very likely to return in the rainy season,” he said, adding that myriads of swarms did exist in Iran as well and could enter Pakistan via Balochistan.

“We apprehend a three- or four-pronged invasion by locusts from the desert areas of Sindh targeting seven districts and this would be an alarming situation,” he said.

Mr Rahu called for effective and coordinated joint efforts by his department, federal plant protection department, National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) and other relevant departments to face the challenge. He noted that the army also stood by the Sindh government in this exercise.

Explaining Sindh's position in this context, the minister said aerial spray was the most effective method but there was only one aircraft without a pilot made available to the provincial government against the actual requirement of six each with a pilot. He said the available aircraft was meant for aerial spray in Sukkur district while five other ones were required for such operations in three other districts — Hyderabad, Mirpur-khas and Shaheed Benazirabad. Also, against the requirement of 25 sprayer-mounted vehicles, only five were made available to Sindh, he added.

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OTTON PRODUCTION SLIDE

By NUZHAT NAZAR on May 13, 2020

The Federal Cabinet on Tuesday decided that the support price of cotton should be fixed after thorough consultations with all the stakeholders in order to encourage farmers to sow more and more cotton as its cultivation has been woefully declining.

Prime minister Imran Khan, who chaired the cabinet's meeting, was in favour of giving subsidies on cotton seed and fertilizer, so that poor growers could benefit.

The cabinet also decided to amend laws on appointment of heads of various government institutions and autonomous bodies in the country. It also reviewed the audit reports relating to alleged embezzlement in the affairs of Karachi Port Trust (KPT).

After the federal cabinet meeting, Information Minister Senator Shibli Faraz, while giving a news briefing, said that a seven-point agenda was discussed in the cabinet meeting.

The information minister said a committee has been constituted to frame a law with regard to appointment of heads for government entities.

He said the committee will work under the supervision of Advisor for Institutional Reforms Dr Ishrat Hussain, which will present its recommendations within a week.

He said Minister for Narcotics Control Azam Khan Swati presented 39 proposals to the prime minister on electoral reforms, which the prime minister appreciated.

The information minister said the decisions of the Cabinet Committee on Energy were ratified in the meeting, while the prime minister directed to expedite the reforms in the energy sector.

Shibli Faraz also said that the PTI is the only party, which has introduced reforms in the electoral process, while reforms in the energy sector are the government's priority.

The information minister said the cabinet approved the names of the National Commission for the Status of Women but the members would be decided by the prime minister.

He said that the cabinet had approved the application of Pakistan Essential Services Act, 1952, on all employees of the National Institutional Facilitation Technology and the approval had been given for six months.

Shibli Faraz also said that the cabinet approved the appointment of member National Accounts and member Census in the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, and also approved the audit to rectify the irregularities in the affairs of the Karachi Port Trust (KPT).

The cabinet approved the names of the members of the National Commission for Status of Women and National Bureau of Statistics.

It also approved decisions taken by the Cabinet's Committee on Energy and Economic Coordination Committee.

The information minister said the cabinet reviewed matters pertaining to audit survey regarding embezzlement in Karachi Port Trust.

Senator Shibli Faraz said Prime Minister Imran Khan also sought a report regarding illegal and unlawful appointments in 12 different ministries within one week.

Talking about the coronavirus challenge, the minister said no country in the world can afford continuous lockdown, and a decision regarding ease in countrywide lockdown was taken in view of difficulties being faced by poor labour class.

He said the government has limited resources and infrastructure, and continuous lockdown was not possible under the prevailing conditions.

The minister urged the citizens and members of the civil society to adopt all necessary precautionary measures, follow guidelines and the SOPs, and support government in its endeavors to contain the pandemic.

APP adds: The PM said all the lacunas in the election laws would be addressed so that the people's trust in the election process was restored and nobody could raise a finger on the transparency of election. A transparent and credible electoral process was the foundation of democracy and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) was the only party which had taken serious efforts and practical steps for electoral reforms.

Expressing the government's commitment, the prime minister directed to intensify efforts so that electoral reforms process should be completed as soon as possible.

Shibli Faraz said the cabinet discussed the issue of unlawful appointments made in various ministries during the previous governments. It transpired that appointments without any cabinet approval were made in 12 ministries. Expressing his serious concern, the prime minister directed all the ministries to share details in next cabinet meeting so that action could be taken on the issue.

Senator Shibli Faraz said the cabinet also approved the names of the members of National Commission on the Status of Women, including Shaista Bukhari from Punjab, Habiba Hassan from Sindh, Rubina Naz Advocate from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Fatima Iqbal from Balochistan, Madhiha Sultana from AJK, Sosan Aziz from Gilgit Baltistan and Asia Azeem from the Federal Capital.

The minister said the PM directed steps for provision of energy to the consumers at affordable rates and reduction of the circular debt. He also directed the minister for energy to complete the process of reformation in various departments of the ministry with a time line.

He said Minister for Planning and Development Asad Umar gave a briefing on the steps being taken to control the coronavirus in the country and presented the report on the situation after relaxation in the lockdown.

Imran Khan remarked that activities in the construction and other sectors had even been allowed by the developed countries keeping in view the ground realities. Keeping the economy afloat and balancing security measures was imperative, he added.

Shibli Faraz it was observed that generally the people did not adopt precautionary measures and the cabinet appealed to them to strictly follow the standard operating procedures (SOPs) as the country could not afford a surge in the coronavirus cases.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/13/596489/country-on-the-brink-of-a-wheat-crisis-pbif-chief/>

PPA OPPOSES PUNJAB GOVT'S BID TO CONTROL POULTRY PRICES

By RECORDER REPORT on May 13, 2020

Pakistan Poultry Association (Northern Region) has urged the Punjab government to allow the free-market mechanism to regulate demand and supply instead of intervening in market prices.

PPA (Northern Region) Vice Chairman Chaudhry Muhammad Fargham while talking to media persons here on Tuesday said the industry was very hurt and depressed by the Punjab government's action of controlling the prices of live chicken and meat. He claimed that the commissioner animal husbandry in the ministry of national food security had submitted cost of production to the Chief Justice of Peshawar High Court as far back as in March 2012 at Rs 31.27 for day old chicks and Rs 132.50/kg for broilers. The current costs are around Rs 45 for day old chick and Rs 160 for broilers. As per calculation of Director PRI Rawalpindi, the cost of production is Rs.145 per kg live.

The association kept the government fully abreast of the situation through different means and said it would lead to an acute shortage of poultry products as the losses would result in a reduction in production and that prices will shoot up. "We had advised the government that in the event of an increase in price, supply would partially but gradually increase to some extent. We had strongly advised the government not to intervene in free-market mechanism but the governments paid no heed," he added.

He said now the market is allowing surviving farmers to recover their losses, the administration is arresting the sellers of chicken meat and forcing them to sell meat at Rs 260/Kg. Such actions would lead to long term closure of poultry farms, which would lead to not only a tremendous increase in chicken meat prices but also mutton, beef and pulses as well, he warned.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/13/596558/govt-committed-to-fulfill-commitments-under-27th-intl-conventions-tweets-pm/>

LOCUST ATTACKS COULD INCREASE TEN TIMES THIS YEAR, FEARS MINISTER

By RECORDER REPORT on May 13, 2020

Sindh Minister for Agriculture Mohammed Ismail Rahu has said that according to the agriculture experts of the world the swarms of locust attacks could be increased ten times more than those of the last year. He informed that the season of two

main crops of cotton and rice was about to start as well as monsoon season was going to start soon which was also the breeding season for locusts as well therefore three months of June, July and August were important in this regard.

This he said while presiding over a meeting about preventive measures for Locust attacks at Agriculture Extension Office, Shahbaz Building, Hyderabad on Tuesday.

The minister further said that swarms of locusts were attacking in Sindh like last year and this danger could not be avoided. He directed the officers concerned for stopping the breeding of locusts in deserted areas of Sindh which according to him could be effective. He said that all resources would be utilized for the elimination of locusts. He asked the officers concerned to take this task as challenge and utilize their expertise and experience to eliminate locusts and save standing crops. He underlined the need for focusing Mirpurkhas, Sukkur and Shaheed Benazirabad divisions situated near to Thar Desert which was the breeding area of locusts.

He said that Sindh Agriculture Department had remained busy for elimination of locusts for one year. Rahu also directed the officers concerned to resolve the problems of growers.

Director General Agriculture Hidayatullah Chajro briefed the meeting about preventive measures for locusts.

The participants of the meeting also gave suggestions for the prevention of locusts. Director Agriculture Shaukat Hussain Mastoi informed the meeting about the present situation of Subzi Mandi and other related issues.

Later Talking to media men, the minister said that the locusts had been present in Sindh for one year and couple of days earlier locusts attacked on crops in different parts of Hyderabad Division. He said that the Sindh government was continuously trying hard to prevent locusts. He informed that the different agriculture institutes of the world issued warning of locusts attacks in our region. He said that after Coronavirus the locusts were the biggest problem for Pakistan, the situation would be worsened in coming days, as locusts from Iran and India could attack in our country, he added. He informed that 57 teams were working for preventing locust attacks and now 41 more teams had been added for this purpose. He said that we were trying to make teams ready at taluka level to spray at any time and added that a helpline number had also been given to growers to inform about locusts' attack. Replying a question, he said that there was no conflict of Sindh with the federal government, we just demanded to federal Plant Protection Department for aerial spray.

He said that losses to crops were being estimated and soon details would be issued.

To a question, he said that due to Covid-19 the problems were being faced on wheat procurement but the Sindh government would achieve its target of wheat procurement. Replying another question, he said that due to Coronavirus, the export of mangoes would be affected.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/13/596455/locust-attacks-could-increase-ten-times-this-year-fears-minister/>

72 PERCENT OF WHEAT PROCUREMENT TARGET COMPLETED, CLAIMS MINISTER

By RECORDER REPORT on May 13, 2020

Punjab has achieved 72 percent of the 4.5 million tons of wheat procurement target set for the current year while 92 percent of 'baardana' (gunny bags) have been distributed among the farmers.

Food Minister Abdul Aleem Khan said this while replying to the questions of food department during the current session of Punjab Assembly. He said a coordinated policy has been implemented for the procurement of wheat in Punjab which has tried to bring direct benefits to common farmers. He also said that the government has ensured uninterrupted supply of "baardana" to the farmers all over the province. He said he himself is keeping an eye on wheat procurement drive and making on the spot checking of all the procedure and claimed no complaint has been received in this regard.

The Minister said that Punjab has set a target of purchasing 4.5 million metric tonnes of wheat which will be completed ahead of time. He said the Punjab government would also meet the wheat requirement of KPK by purchasing additional wheat while another 5 lakh metric tonnes is also under consideration for an extraordinary situation.

Aleem Khan assured that people of Punjab will not be facing the shortage of food grains. He claimed that the food department is fulfilling its responsibilities and all necessary steps are being taken to meet the requirements. He also answered various supplementary questions of the food department and informed the session about the steps taken by it for the betterment of this sector.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/13/596449/seven-2-percent-of-wheat-procurement-target-completed-claims-minister/>

90% BAGS FOR COLLECTING WHEAT DISTRIBUTED

By Our Correspondent Published: May 13, 2020

LAHORE: Provincial Senior Minister Abdul Aleem Khan has said that a coordinated policy has been implemented for the procurement of wheat in Punjab while trying to bring direct benefits to the farmers.

Replying to lawmakers' questions about the Food Department in the Punjab Assembly, he added that 72 per cent target of the procurement of wheat has been achieved in Punjab, while the distribution of 92 per cent bags to farmers has been completed for the purpose so far.

The minister said the Punjab government has ensured uninterrupted supply of sacks to the farmers all over the province this year. He told the house that he had inspected the wheat procurement drive and found no complaint on the ground.

He said Punjab has set a target of purchasing 4.5 million tonnes of wheat, which will hopefully be completed ahead of time. He said the Punjab government would also meet the wheat requirement of K-P besides. He said the additional purchase of 500,000 tonnes is also under consideration to meet an extraordinary situation.

The minister said illegal transportation of wheat in Punjab has been strictly curtailed and largescale operations have been carried out against hoarders without any discrimination.

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<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2220247/1-90-bags-collecting-wheat-distributed/>

FLOUR CRISIS FEARED AS PRICE GOES UP

Ali Hazrat Bacha May 14, 2020

PESHAWAR: The price of a 20kg wheat flour bag went up by Rs30 here on Wednesday as the local millers stopped supplies to hundreds of points selling flour in different parts of the provincial capital at subsidised rate.

Flour dealers of the main Rampura Market told Dawn that 20kg bag of mixed quality flour was sold for Rs920-Rs930 in the wholesale level against the previous rate of Rs870-Rs880 and the 20kg fine atta bag at Rs1,000.

The Bara Road wholesalers and retailers were found to have fixed the price at will.

According to the dealers, sales points were set up in different localities to provide flour to people at the controlled price of Rs808 per bag but they're closed at the moment.

They said wheat supply from Punjab had been suspended to the mills of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa leading to the closure of sales points.

Millers insist situation caused by halt to wheat supply from Punjab

The dealers said the flour price had increased in Punjab, where millers continuously demanded increase in wheat quota at the subsidised rate but the government didn't do so.

They added that the dealers of KP, too, had to purchase wheat at high price.

Meanwhile, the Pakistan Flour Mills Association, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, has warned a halt to the grinding of wheat over the suspension of supplies at subsidised rate from the provincial government.

It also feared a severe flour crisis in the province after Eidul Fitr.

"All of our 180 flour mills are to stop the grinding within a couple of days due to ban on wheat supply from Punjab KP flour mills," association president Haji Mohammad Iqbal told Dawn.

He demanded the lifting of the ban on wheat supply from Punjab to KP to control flour price hike.

Meanwhile, the millers led by Mohammad Naeem Butt and office-bearers of the Sarhad Chamber of Commerce and Industry also held a meeting at the chamber's offices with SCCI president Engineer Maqsood Anwar Pervaiz in the chair.

They demanded of Chief Minister Mahmood Khan to intervene and ensure the restoration of wheat supply from Punjab to KP.

The millers said the government of Punjab had imposed an 'unconstitutional' and 'unlawful' ban on wheat transportation to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and that ban was a clear violation of Article 151 of the Constitution.

"Our province is deficient in wheat, so it mostly depends on Punjab to fulfil its needs," a miller said.

He said wheat supply to local mills from the government's godowns had come to a halt and that all mills would be closed under the prevailing circumstances as there was no other option to acquire wheat.

The millers said due to the unavailability of wheat on the market, they were unable to continue supplying flour to the markets at the subsidised price, which had led to the fear of flour shortage across the province.

"We had earlier warned the government to take up the wheat ban issue with Sindh, Punjab and federal governments but they paid no attention," Mr Naeem Butt said.

He added that the entire responsibility rested with the provincial government.

The miller alleged that the current performance of the provincial government, especially food department, in the prevailing circumstances was very disappointing.

Mr Maqsood Pervaiz asked the government to lift the 'inter-provincial' ban on wheat supply from Punjab to KP to ensure the timely availability of wheat to local mills and fulfil the requirement of food commodity and avert any flour crisis in the province.

He said the economic and business activities had slowed down due to the prolonged coronavirus-induced lockdown, while the imposition of ban on the transportation of wheat and unavailability of wheat for local mills would lead to the closure of flour industry in the province.

The SCCI chief said the unavailability of wheat for KP flour mills was completely unjust and unbearable and that the ban on wheat transportation should be lifted immediately.

He urged Prime Minister Imran Khan, federal food minister and secretary and other authorities to take an immediate notice of the 'unconstitutional' and 'unlawful' inter-provincial restrictions on wheat supply and ensure the smooth availability of wheat of KP flour mills.

When contacted, food secretary Nisar Ahmad said the province had a stock of over 35,000 metric tons of wheat in its godowns but that was meant for emergency situation only.

"We regularly provide wheat quota to local mills but now Punjab has stopped supplies due to own requirements, so millers have to arrange wheat privately by themselves," he said.

The official said the province's mills had to depend 80 per cent on wheat from Punjab.

"KP markets have flour in sufficient quantity but wheat supply has been stopped by Punjab due to local procurement process," he said.

The secretary said wheat harvesting had begun in KP, so millers should acquire it to operate mills until the regular supply was made from official godowns.

He said the relevant authorities were well aware of the situation.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556928>

ECC OKAYS RS50BN FOR AGRICULTURE SECTOR

Khaleeq Kiani Updated May 14, 2020

ISLAMABAD: The government on Wednesday approved a Rs50 billion package for the agriculture sector and about Rs17bn additional funds to defence forces to foot extra fuel bills.

The decisions were taken at a meeting of the Economic Coordination Committee (ECC) of the Cabinet, presided over by Finance Adviser Dr Abdul Hafeez Shaikh, that also approved in principle a cell phone assembling policy.

The ECC was given a demand of Rs56.6bn agriculture package to provide the farmers subsidy on fertilisers, reduction in bank mark-up on agriculture loans, subsidy on cotton seed and white fly pesticides and sales tax subsidy on locally manufactured tractors as part Rs100bn earmarked for farmers and small and medium enterprises (SME) out of the Rs1,200bn coronavirus relief package.

However, Shaikh asked the food security ministry to rationalise it to Rs50bn as per its share in the overall Rs100 package announced for the SMEs and the agriculture sector.

He said the ECC had already approved a Rs50bn package for the former to provide indirect cash flow support to nearly 3.5 million people through pre-paid electricity.

Rs17bn set aside for defence forces' fuel bill

Under the agriculture package, about Rs37bn subsidy would be offered to farmers on the purchase of fertilisers. The amount would include a subsidy of Rs925 per bag on DAP and other phosphatic fertilisers and Rs243 per bag on urea and other nitrogen fertilisers.

The ECC was told that the estimated urea offtake would be around 3.04m tonnes while DAP was estimated at 0.95m tonnes for the Kharif season. The subsidy scheme will be implemented by the provinces and the amount will be disbursed through a scratch card scheme already in place in Punjab.

It was also informed that the fertiliser share in the cost of production for major crops was around 10-15 per cent and the provision of subsidy would increase their affordability to adopt the recommended level of fertiliser nutrient use and best agricultural management practices.

Similarly, under the agriculture package, a reduction in mark-up of agri loans at the total cost of Rs8.8bn, subsidy on cotton seed worth Rs2.3bn and white fly pesticides at Rs6bn were also approved.

Furthermore, the ECC called for inclusion of other banks along with Zarai Taraqiati in the scheme to enhance outreach of farmers with focus on subsistence farmers with a land holding of 12.5 acres. It was suggested that since markup had been reduced by the State Bank of Pakistan, the interest rates used in the proposal could also be rationalised accordingly.

The ECC called for the implementation mechanism, especially through the scratch card system, to be monitored carefully to ensure that the actual beneficiaries of the package were genuine farmers.

It was also pointed out that since with the provision of subsidy on fertilisers, their demand might increase, the same had to be communicated to the Ministry of Industries and Production (MoIP) in time to make arrangements accordingly.

The meeting approved a proposal by the Poverty Alleviation & Social Safety Division for disbursement of the Special Relief Package for the population living along the Line of Control in a single installment of Rs12,000 for six months from January-June while from July onwards, those families will be given monthly installments of Rs2,000 each until end of December.

The ECC took up different proposals for technical supplementary grants by various divisions and approved one by the Defence Division for a supplementary grant of Rs16.6bn to meet the expenses on POL, utilities and medical stores of the Defence Services.

In addition, it okayed Rs288m for payment of salaries to the employees of Pakistan Machine Tool Factory for the period from October 2019 to June 2020 and Rs40 million to the law ministry for employee-related costs and operating expenditures of the Federal Judicial Academy.

The ECC also discussed the Mobile Device Manufacturing Policy as proposed by the MoIP with the objectives of technology acquisition and localisation of mobile devices through domestic investment, joint ventures, FDIs, creation of 200,000 direct and indirect jobs, price reduction for consumers, increase in digitisation through supporting 4G/5G

technologies, development of efficient manufacturing ecosystem, exports of competitively manufactured handsets and achievement of security objectives.

It deliberated upon various components of the policy and approved in-principle with instructions to the MoIP to further fine-tune its various features and incentives for promoting localisation and research and development leading to export of mobile phones.

Lastly, the ECC gave green signal to the release of 35,000 tonnes of wheat from the Pakistan Agriculture Storage and Services Corporation to the Azad Jammu and Kashmir government at Rs1.52bn, including the cost of wheat and incidental charges, to be paid 50pc by the federal administration from the stimulus package announced to fight against Covid-19.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556946>

DIESEL SHORTAGE, POL PRICES CUT MAY HAMPER WHEAT HARVESTING

Amjad Mahmood May 11, 2020

LAHORE: There seems to be no let-up in the miseries of the farmers as the authorities remain apathetic to the diesel shortage being faced by them in the middle of the wheat harvesting season.

Reports of unavailability of diesel in the market had started doing rounds a couple of days after downward revision of the rates of petroleum products on April 30 in line with the sharp decline in their prices in the world market.

Almost all oil marketing companies stopped placing orders with the international suppliers as soon as the Oil and Gas Regulatory Authority (Ogra) hinted at proposing a cut in oil prices.

Already suffering because of shortage of labour due to Covid-19 lockdown, wheat growers are facing another unexpected crisis amid the harvesting season in the form of unavailability of diesel to run their tractors and threshing machines. This may lead to delay in harvesting.

Farmers riding their tractor-trolleys and pick-ups carrying barrels and jerry cans can be seen queuing up at the filling stations to get diesel, particularly in Bhakkar, Layyah and Mianwali districts of Punjab. In most cases, they return empty-handed or get a few litres of diesel.

“At a time when I should have been in my lands to oversee wheat harvesting, I’m forced to line up at petrol pumps to get diesel for my tractor-run thresher,” laments Rana Haider, a farmer from Thal area in Bhakkar.

Talking to Dawn by phone, he says that he has lost his three precious days in search of diesel but failed to find the product and he is paying rent for the threshing machine without using it.

Saeed Baloch, a petrol pump owner in Mianwali, claims the oil marketing companies have introduced quota regimes since April 30 for the first time on the basis of average calculated on the yearly basis and thus are providing them one-fourth of the supplies against the demand.

The companies are also delaying the supplies contrary to their normal routines, he alleges, explaining that he would get oil supply the next day of placing the order. But, since the recent cut in prices, this gap between placement of order and supplies has widened to the minimum four days, creating a severe shortage particularly of diesel, he adds.

He wonders why the government didn't manage the situation while the state-run Pakistan State Oil had flagged the issued in the first week of May.

An official of the PSO Lahore region alleges that the private oil marketing companies (OMCs) are not supplying petroleum products to their respective dealers and thus the whole pressure has been diverted to the PSO outlets. He says that his entity is supplying one million litres of diesel daily only in Lahore region to meet the wheat harvesting-related demand.

A petroleum dealer, Rehmat Khan Wardag, says OMCs have not placed orders for the import of petroleum products since the recent cut in oil prices. He says the OMCs suffered billions of rupees losses in the process and fears that the volatile situation in the world markets will keep them away from the business in coming weeks, which may lead to severe shortage of oil, particularly diesel, in the local market.

He has urged the government to import oil on its own without delay to fend off the hovering shortage that may plunge the sectors dependent on diesel, particularly the agriculture sector, into a severe crisis.

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FOOD OFFICIAL MANHANDLED BY TOWN COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN FOR INTERCEPTING WHEAT STOCK

Dawn Report May 11, 2020

UMERKOT: Harassment and manhandling of a food department official by Samaro town committee chairman late on Saturday evening sent a wave of anger among food officials across the town. An emergency meeting of senior food officials was held on Sunday to condemn the incident.

It was gathered that food inspector Iftikhar Arain, along with a police team, intercepted a consignment of 1,200 wheat bags of 40-kg each while it was being transported by two trucks to some other district. The action was taken as part of the ongoing campaign against hoarding/illegal movement of wheat stocks which was causing an artificial shortage of the commodity and wheat flour in the province.

According to Mr Arain, when he impounded one truck-load of wheat and chased the other truck, Samaro town committee chairman, Rafique Ahmed Qaimkhani, who belonged to the ruling Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), along with some other persons intervened and harassed him to deter him from discharging his official duty. "Qaimkhani abused and held me hostage for some time and then slapped me when I did not agree to come to his terms," alleged Mr Arain.

He said he intended to recover more than 14,000 other wheat bags hoarded in his area of operation to prevent the stocks from being shifted to some other district/province in violation of the relevant ban imposed by the provincial government.

Escorted by a police force, the officials recovered more than 1,00,000 wheat bags and sealed off the mills.

Reacting angrily to the incident, senior food officials held a meeting under the chairmanship of Mohammed Hussain Mahar to discuss the issue. Ghulam Nabi Soomro, Iftikhar Arain and other senior officials including heads of all procurement centres in the district attended the meeting.

The meeting condemned the town committee chairman's act of hooliganism as unacceptable. It said Qaimkhani's attempt of obstructing the food official from performing his duty was unlawful. Appropriate action must be taken against him and those who accompanied him in this unlawful act, it added.

The meeting participants said no one was above the law and, as such, could not be allowed to stop any official from performing duty in line with the orders issued by government.

They resolved to stop performing their official duties pertaining to wheat procurement if action was not taken against the offenders.

SUKKUR: Raids were conducted in three flour mills in the Salehpat town as the drive against hoarders of wheat continued in Sukkur district, food officials said on Saturday.

In Jacobabad, district food controller Asghar Soomro along with Assistant Commissioner of Garhi Khero Sanaullah Bhatti carried out a raid on a rice mill in Dao Jahanpur on the orders of Deputy Commissioner Ghazanfar Ali Qadri.

NAUSHAHRO FEROUZE: District food controller Qareebullah Soomro said on Saturday that around 145,500 wheat bags were recovered in raids on several godowns in grain markets of Bhiriya Road, Kandiaro, Mehrabpur and Khan Wahan towns.

The raiding team found more than 20,000 wheat bags clandestinely stocked there. The stocks were seized and the rice mill was sealed, the officials said.

He told local reporters around 40,000 wheat bags were recovered in Khan Wahan, 35,000 in Mehrabpur, 11,500 in Kandiaro and 60,000 in Bhiriya Road.

All the godowns were sealed, he added.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556097/food-official-manhandled-by-town-committee-chairman-for-intercepting-wheat-stock>

SUKKUR NAB READIES FOUR REFERENCES ON WHEAT SCAM

The Newspaper's Correspondent May 11, 2020

SUKKUR: The Sukkur region of the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) has prepared four references concerning misappropriation of billions of rupees worth of wheat in food department and is ready to file them in accountability court, according to sources.

Sources in the NAB said the references would be filed after seeking formal approval of the bureau's chairman. In this connection, a meeting of NAB's regional board presided over by its Sukkur director general reviewed the scam in Sukkur, Larkana and Shaheed Benazirabad divisions and accorded approval to the references prepared against the corrupt officials of food department.

The sources said the NAB chairman himself had issued directives to file the references over growing complaints about large-scale corruption in food department in different districts of the province.

The sources said that a reference accused deputy director food Anees-ur-Rehman Mahar, district food controller Mohammad Iqbal Memon and others of Rs128 million corruption and another reference blamed Khairpur district food controller Mohammad Ali Ujjan and others of more than Rs58m graft in the stored grain.

The third reference accused Larkana district food controller Zahid Ali Unnar and others of Rs870m corruption and the fourth blamed Kandhkot-Kashmore's deputy director of food Fazal Mohammad Bhangwar and others of more than Rs74m graft.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556096/sukkur-nab-readies-four-references-on-wheat-scam>

IT'S A SEASON OF MANGOES AND COVID-19

Mohammad Hussain Khan May 11, 2020

THE season of the king of fruits — mangoes — has started. But this year, it starts amidst serious concerns of coronavirus spreading in Sindh's rural areas since thousands of labourers arrive from South Punjab, mainly Muzaffargarh. Under the current circumstances, allowing them to enter Sindh is risky since this may allow the contagion to spread in rural areas which, by and large, have remained safe compared with urban areas.

To harvest mangoes, big orchard owners let out their farms to contractors. Punjab's labourers – hired by the orchard contractors – have begun to arrive in Sindh's mango farms, which are larger, through different means of transport, while consignments from these farms have started reaching Punjab.

Till May 7, the Sindh government was debating standard operating procedures (SOPs) to let these workers enter the province. Draft SOPs have been presented to the Sindh government by Sharjeel Inam Memon, an orchard owner who is a Sindh Assembly member from Hyderabad's rural area. He had raised this issue of Punjab's labourers with the government as they turned up in thousands.

"I have discussed SOPs with the Sindh chief minister and he has not yet finalised them. We are trying to see the situation is handled adroitly," says Mr Memon, an influential member of Sindh's ruling party.

Among other measures, the 11-point draft recommends that growers/contractors provide a list of workers from other provinces. It also states enrollment forms will have to be filled and submitted before revenue officials within five working days of labourers commencing work. Items such as gloves, masks and hand sanitisers have to be provided to those working along the entire mango value chain.

Every grower has to try to engage the maximum number of local labourers and minimise hiring from elsewhere for plucking and packing purposes. If a worker develops Covid-19 symptoms, he has to be sent for a checkup. A proforma has to be filled by each worker for tracking and tracing purposes.

'There is no rocket science involved which would prevent local labour from learning to pluck or pack mangoes. Previously, nobody thought of departing from the conventional practice of labour coming in from Punjab to Sindh because there was no reason for it'

The Sindh government is continuously resisting pressure from the PTI-led federal government, as well as the business community, to ease the lockdown. The chief minister had even differed, rightly so, with the 20-point SOPs mutually agreed between the ulema and President Arif Alvi on Taraweeh prayers in Ramazan to stem the spread of the contagion. He feared the SOPs will not be implementable therefore sought to restrict prayer congregations.

Currently, Sindh health officials dealing with the Covid-19 situation and pandemic trajectory believe May is going to be tough from the point of view of a spike in the number of cases. “We are bracing for an exponential rise in cases if the lockdown is eased,” observes a Sindh health official associated with monitoring the Covid-19 situation. “The impact of the decision taken for opening up of businesses will be seen after a fortnight,” he asserted.

Labourers have already started to arrive unchecked in Sindh from Punjab where an upward trend in the number of cases can be seen, and more are on their way. It is a foregone conclusion that the SOPs specific to mango workers will not be doable, any more than those that were drafted for prayer congregations.

“I think this is an opportunity that can bring local labourers forward and help overcome unemployment currently seen in the pandemic’s backdrop,” says Sindh agriculture minister Ismail Rahu, who is the son of hari leader Fazil Rahu. The real issue, he opines, pertains to big farms that are let out to contractors who hire workers from Punjab. “One expert worker brought from Punjab for each farm should be enough, the rest should be purely local labourers to handle the mango crop this season. This is how they will get trained as well,” he remarks.

The issue of workers from Punjab coming to Sindh has surfaced for the first time because of the pandemic, otherwise, it was conventional practice for orchard owners and contractors. Locally known as bharawa and thukawa, labour from Punjab has picked, sorted and packed mangoes with dexterity for years.

The contractors’ argument is since available local labour is not trained, engaging them would cause mango wastage and result in monetary losses. Therefore, this issue is more of contractors than of orchard owners.

Labour from Punjab arrives in groups of 40-50 people. Depending on the size of an orchard, multiple teams work together, switching from one farm to another if need be. They stay at farms and leave once the season is finished, awaiting the arrival of kinnow season in Punjab.

“There is no rocket science involved which would prevent local labour from learning to pluck or pack mangoes. Nobody thought of departing from conventional practice before because there was no reason for it,” remarks Sindh Abadgar Board vice president Mahmood Nawaz Shah, who is also an owner of mango orchards and an exporter. To quote a medium-sized mango grower Nadeem Shah, Punjab’s labour is cheap as well as trained.

The Sindh government remained worried till all the men from Tableeghi Jamaat – who became virus carriers in the province in March – recovered and were repatriated home. The government’s efforts to ensure safe transportation was praised. Given its lockdown policy, it is unlikely that the Murad Shah-led government will have two different standards relating to the same emergency.

While things are challenging this year, it is an opportunity to engage local labour so that they get trained and there is less reliance on workers from another province next season. It would not be difficult for the locals to learn the art of sorting and plucking since they work in the fields all year round. Is saving mangoes more important than saving lives?

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556252/its-a-season-of-mangoes-and-covid-19>

AGRICULTURAL HARDSHIP UNDER LOCKDOWN

Amjad Mahmood Updated May 11, 2020

THE agriculture sector is facing one of its biggest crises. On one hand, erratic weather and the resultant untimely heavy rains and hailstorms, coupled with the locust attack, are making it hard for farmers to sleep at night. On the other hand, the lockdown since mid-March has created many challenges and negatively impacted the rural population in general and small farm holders in particular.

The prolonged shutdown across the country has not only reduced on-farms activities but also disturbed the transport and sale of crops, vegetables and fruits, as well as the purchase of farm inputs.

Livestock, the most important sub-sector which contributes around 60 per cent of agriculture's share to GDP, is the major victim of the Covid-19 outbreak. To meet their day-to-day expenses, small farmers rear milch cattle and sell the milk. Closure of tea-stalls, sweets shops and the reduced timing for milk shops under the lockdown's standard operating procedures (SOPs) shrank demand for this highly perishable commodity and thus cut its rates.

Salahuddin, a smallholder farmer from Narang Mandi town near Lahore, says he gets 72 litres of milk from his nine buffaloes. Before the lockdown, the milkman would give him Rs80 per litre but now is not willing to buy at even Rs50 per litre citing hurdles in the onward sale because of virus issues. Likewise, owner of a known sweet shop in Mian Channu (Khanewal) has his own dairy farm but since he is disallowed to open his business because of the lockdown, he is forced to sell milk at Rs40 per litre in the town, says Pakistan Kissan Ittehad general secretary Mian Umair, who belongs to the area.

Some dairy farmers are turning towards value addition in the form of mozzarella cheese and ghee to prolong milk's shelf life rather than sell it at throwaway prices

Initially suffering at the hands of the milkman, Mr Salahuddin is now trying to find a solution through value addition: he is preparing (mozzarella quality) cheese and trying to sell it online. Even if he doesn't manage to find buyers, this will enhance the shelf life of the milk. Similarly, some dairy farmers are making desi ghee out of milk instead of selling the commodity at throwaway prices.

Closure of hotels and the ban on weddings and parties is also hurting the once thriving poultry sector. Vegetables are also being sold at low rates in the wholesale market though end consumers are not benefitting from the low prices as the middlemen are making a killer profit.

"The first month of the lockdown was particularly difficult for farmers as delinked from the markets, they had to sell their dairy and farm products at throwaway prices," says Farooq Tariq, general secretary of Pakistan Kissan Rabita Committee, a representative of smallholder farmers. "Those engaged in producing horticulture, floriculture and dairy farming were shattered with the losses for being forced to market their commodities at whatever rate offered in the local bazaar."

Hanf Hanjra, a horticulturist from Sargodha, says previously he earned a good living during the wedding and Ramazan seasons by dispatching his produce to big markets like Lahore and Gujranwala. "However, this time I'm hardly able to meet my expenses because I'm forced to sell my farm produce in the local market at much lower rates as either transport to far-off markets is not available or its charges are unaffordable." He claims he could not once cover transport charges even for the Sargodha market where his four maunds (around 160kg) of coriander was sold for just Rs70 in wholesale.

Unfortunately, the harvesting season of wheat, politically the most important crop, has also fallen in this time of social distancing. The already scarce manual labour has been further reduced because of mobility issues in the wake of the pandemic. And this gap in demand and supply has pushed up wages of available farmworkers.

“Labour is costlier this year as workers face problems crossing police check-posts erected to curtail the movement of people,” says Mian Umair. Previously, he would pay 160kg per acre of wheat to a worker for reaping his crop and now this rate has gone up to 210kg per acre. Facing issues trying to convince the mostly illiterate labour force to observe social distancing rules, he says he had to hire manpower from as far as Kasur district, more than 200km away from Mian Channu.

The farming sector was also hit because of difficulties in obtaining inputs and the shutdown of agriculture-engineering and allied industries. Though the government has permitted auto workshops to function when the wheat harvesting season sets in, the decision to allow shops of lath machines, spare parts, etc came a bit late in the day and farmers could not get their tractors, tube-wells and allied machines repaired in time. There were also difficulties in procuring medicine for cattle, bemoans Mr Salah.

Mr Tariq regrets that small farmers, one of the hardest-hit class by the lockdown, are not being considered for compensation by the government. He fears that this will lead to the compounding of rural poverty, disabling particularly the landless farmers from the purchase of seed and other farm inputs for the next crop.

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QCCI BACKS FLOUR MILLERS’ DEMAND

CORRESPONDENT May 11, 2020

QUETTA. Quetta Chamber of Commerce and Industry backed Pakistan Flour Mills Association’s demand of lifting inter-district ban on the transportation of wheat in the name of coronavirus lockdown. “Section 144 is imposed across Balochistan to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

However, the ban on inter-district transportation on wheat could cause food shortage in the province,” said QCCI Senior Vice President Badaruddin Kakar in a statement issued on Saturday. Kakar accused the provincial government and food department of deliberately causing wheat turmoil in Balochistan to ruin the provincial flour mill industry.

“Naseerabad, Jhal Magsi and Jaffar districts fulfill wheat requirements of other districts of the province. Despite the fact, Balochistan government making any policy and strategy,” said the QCCI senior vice president in the statement.

He alleged the provincial government for attempting to create wheat shortage to increase flour prices across the province. Criticising wheat procurement policy of the government, Kakar said, “Balochistan produces 80 to 90 million sacks of wheat in a year but the government announced to procure only one million sacks which will ruin the flour mills business in the province.

https://epaper.tribune.com.pk/DisplayDetails.aspx?ENI_ID=11202005110209&EN_ID=11202005110063&EMID=11202005110030

PAKISTAN'S SUGAR POLICY NEEDS REFORMS

By HARI LOHANO Published: May 11, 2020

KARACHI: In the midst of the coronavirus crisis, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government has released the probe commission report on the misuse of sugar and wheat subsidies in the country.

The report shows the power and influence of sugar barons in relation to the country's policy-making. Most of the names mentioned in the report are close associates of the PM, the PTI and the ministers in the government.

PM Imran deserves much credit for the release of the report. He has promised to take decisive action after the probe commission submits its final recommendations.

Findings of the report raise crucial questions about the government's sugar policy and the transparency of its economic policy. How does the sugar policy work? How sugar subsidy benefits only the sugar industry?

Sugarcane is a high-value, rich farmer's crop due its special characteristics. Its per-acre expenses are much higher than any other cash crop.

The time from planting to harvesting is longer. Its marketing chain, from buying seed to arranging tractor trollies for transporting it to sugar mills, negotiating price and finally getting payment, involves very lengthy processes. This favours the rich and better-off farmers as against the cash-starved small landowners.

Pakistan is among the top 10 sugarcane producing countries in the world, with plantations over a million hectares. Sugarcane production accounts for nearly two-thirds of the area in Punjab and a quarter in Sindh.

It uses more of the subsidised agricultural inputs, especially fertiliser and water, than any other crop in the economy. In a highly water-stressed country like Pakistan, sugarcane uses a much higher quantity of water than any other crop.

Between 2013-14 and 2017-18, according to the Economic Survey of Pakistan, the production of sugarcane increased by an impressive 24%, from 67 to 83 million tonnes.

During this period, the area where sugarcane was cultivated increased by 14% from 1.17 to 1.34 million hectares. The average yield per hectare, rising from 57 to 62 tonnes, shows an increase of only 8%.

The area under sugarcane cultivation in Pakistan is the fifth largest in the world after Brazil, India, China and Thailand. Its per-hectare yield, however, is much lower than the other major producers.

Its yield of 62 tonnes per hectare in 2018 was well below the world average of 73 tonnes and even below India's yield of 80 tonnes.

Figures for last year's crop (2018-19), compared with the average performance of crops in the previous five years, showed a decline of 9% in sugarcane cultivation and 6% in production. This decline is mainly attributed to late payments to farmers, shortage of water and an uncertain political environment during the 2018 election.

As in production, Pakistan is among the top 10 countries in consumption of sugar in the world and the biggest consumer of sugar in South Asia. Consumption of sugar is over 25 kg per person per year in Pakistan. In India, it is 20 kg and in China 11 kg.

Pakistan has 89 sugar mills, a much higher number than needed for domestic requirement. Some of these are located in regions where they are economically unviable and environmentally unsuitable.

Most of these mills are owned by very influential and powerful families. They belong to the governing party, the main opposition parties and the families of former generals.

At the time of Independence in 1947, there were only two sugar mills in the country. Until 1970, there were only four.

The mushroom growth of the mills was mainly during General Zia's period of office (1977-1988), when state patronage was provided to create a new business and political class to counter political opposition to his dictatorial rule. Since then, all the major political parties have followed this path and expanded it.

This growth of the sugar industry has had a very adverse effect on the country's other climatically suitable cash crop, cotton, which has been the backbone of the agriculture sector and a major source of foreign currency reserves for the country.

Between 2013-14 and 2017-18, the area under cotton cultivation declined by 4% and its production by 6%. More strikingly, when 2018-19 is compared with the average performance of the crop in the previous five years, its cultivation area has declined by 17% and production fell by two million bales or 20%.

The pricing policy for sugarcane and sugar is based on government intervention in the market through huge public subsidies, direct and indirect, at various levels of production and sale of the commodity.

At the time of harvesting the crop, the government announces a guaranteed minimum price for sugarcane, to encourage farmers to increase the area under cultivation. The government even decides about the movement of the crop – to ensure that sugar mill owners receive plenty of the produce to keep their business viable.

To protect the sugar industry further, the government imposes higher tariffs on sugar imports to “stabilise” prices in the domestic market. In general, the domestic price for sugar remains much higher than the average world price.

In addition, the government provides an export subsidy on sugar in the name of increasing foreign currency reserves.

The government's decision in September 2018 to allow export of sugar, despite early indications of low production in the country, was a continuation of past public policy to protect the industry.

Pakistan exported 0.4 million tonnes of sugar in 2016-17 and 1.6 million tonnes in 2017-18. Moreover, in 2017, during the period of Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) government, the sugar export quota was increased from 0.5 to 2 million tonnes.

There are two prices for refined sugar in the domestic market. One is the ex-mill price, which is the wholesale price at which the mill sells its product to traders and shopkeepers. The other is the retail price of sugar sold to customers at local corner shops and supermarkets – the price paid by common consumers.

The decision to export the commodity caused a hike in both these prices. The ex-mill price increased from Rs52 to Rs54 per kg in January 2019. The retail price, however, increased from Rs56 to Rs59, a rise of 6%.

With the increasing exports, prices increased regularly for domestic consumers. Even after the ban on sugar exports in February, prices remain on the higher side.

Between December 2019 and March 2020, the ex-mill price for sugar increased by 39% to Rs72. In the same period, the retail price increased by 33% to Rs80.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s April 2020 report also mentions that wholesale prices for sugar in Pakistan were over 50% higher in March than the international prices.

The sugar industry has benefitted enormously from the government's policy. In addition to the export subsidy of Rs3 billion by the Punjab government, the sugar mill owners have received extra profit to the extent of Rs85 billion – Rs5.7 billion per month from January 2019 to the end of March 2020.

The above discussion demonstrates that the government's sugar policy distorts the local market. This harms poor the most and inflicts huge costs on the domestic economy. The only beneficiary is the influential and powerful sugar industry.

At the time of pandemic and huge risks to economy, the government should refrain from intervening in the sugar market and consider reforms in the industry through parliamentary procedures and democratic practices.

In this hour of economic crisis, the government should focus more on the protection of poor and welfare of society through the provision of public goods like healthcare and strengthen the social safety nets.

The writer is a PhD from the UK and writes for The Guardian as well

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2218472/2-pakistans-sugar-policy-needs-reforms/>

HAILSTORM DAMAGES WHEAT CROP, ORCHARDS IN BAJAUR

The Newspaper's Correspondent Updated May 12, 2020

KHAR: Rain coupled with hailstorm damaged standing wheat crop, vegetables and orchards in Mamond tehsil of Bajaur tribal district, residents and officials said on Monday.

They said that hailstorm accompanied by rain started just after Iftari and lasted for about one hour.

They said that Dabar, Badan, Shah Goo, Shahi Thangi, Mokha, Kalpanim Kaga, Sewai and other hilly areas were the worst affected.

Local residents told this correspondent that hailstones were very large in size, severely damaging the standing crop of wheat, vegetables and orchards in the region.

They said that the growers were expecting good harvest of wheat crop this year, but hailstones largely damaged it.

District agriculture officer Ziaul Islam Dawar told Dawn that the hailstorm caused extensive damage to wheat crop and vegetables in Mamond tehsil.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556473/hailstorm-damages-wheat-crop-orchards-in-bajaur>

33,000 TONS OF WHEAT RECOVERED DURING RAIDS: MINISTER

By RECORDER REPORT on May 12, 2020

The Punjab Food Department has so far recovered 33,130 tons of stored wheat by raiding 436 storage places in different districts of the province.

The recovered wheat has been seized and action is being taken against the accused under the law, said Senior Minister Punjab Abdul Aleem Khan here on Monday.

The minister said that strict action was being taken against wheat stockpiling across the province and crackdown was being carried out indiscriminately against the elements involved in this heinous crime.

In a briefing session of the food department, Aleem Khan said that for the last two weeks, strict checks were being carried out on the land and river routes of Punjab where smuggling of wheat had been curtailed with the help of the intelligence agencies and Rangers.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/12/596146/three-3000-tons-of-wheat-recovered-during-raids-minister/>

KHARIF SEASON PADDY TO BE SOWN OVER 4.618M ACRES IN PUNJAB

RECORDER REPORT May 12, 2020

SIALKOT: More than 4.618 million acres of land would be brought under paddy crop during Kharif season in various rice growing areas of the Punjab.

Sources in Agriculture department told Business Recorder on Monday that the department had chalked out a well-knitted training programme to create awareness among the growers about the use of recommended seed and proper use of fertilizer to attain the fixed target in Punjab.

In this regard, the department deputed special training teams which were visiting various villages for providing proper guidance and assistance about the use of inputs, nursery sowing and transfer of plants into fields to the rice growers in the Punjab.

In Sialkot district, paddy will be cultivated on 317030 acres of land in Sialkot, Daska, Pasrur and Sambrial tehsils during Kharif season. The paddy would be sown on 91083 acres in Sialkot, 78053 acres in Daska, 103098 acres in Pasrur and 44796 acres in Sambrial tehsils of Sialkot district. Local agriculture department had initiated farmers training programme in 1442 villages of Sialkot, Daska, Pasrur and Sambrial tehsils of Sialkot district. Special training teams were busy to empower rice growers for enhancing per acre yield, sowing of paddy nurseries, utilization of irrigation water, pesticides and fertilizer as well as about the different varieties of paddy in Sialkot district, the sources added.

Some progressive farmers were adopting modern technology for raising rice nursery by automatic machine in plastic trays at local agriculture farm and ready for transplanting by 'Rice Trans Planter' in Bajwat area of Sialkot.

<https://epaper.brecorder.com/2020/05/12/10-page/836745-news.html>

TRADING ACTIVITIES RESUME ON COTTON MARKET

By RECORDER REPORT on May 12, 2020

Trading activities resume on the cotton market on Monday after the closure of more than one and a half months due to the coronavirus lockdown.

Market sources said that traders are hopeful that situation will be improved gradually after the softening of the lockdown by the government.

Cotton analyst Naseem Usman told that both federal and provincial governments should take steps to save the cotton crop from the locust attack. The recent report of Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations warned of a potentially serious food security crisis this year in several regional countries, including Pakistan, due to locust attacks.

It is expected that Pakistan's Rabi and Kharif crops will be badly affected by locust attack. According to the estimates Pakistan's economy has to bear the loss of Rs 669 billion due to the locust attack during the current year.

Naseem Usman said that Spot Rate Committee of Karachi Cotton Association has stabled the spot rate at Rs 8600 per maund. The rate of cotton in Sindh and Punjab is in between Rs 7000 to Rs 8600 per maund. The rate of polyester fiber was decreased by Rs 3 per kg and was available at Rs 157 per kg.

<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/12/596129/trading-activities-resume-on-cotton-market/>

K-P CHALKS OUT STRATEGY TO BATTLE LOCUSTS

By Our Correspondent Published: May 12, 2020

PESHAWAR: After crops in multiple districts were ravaged by locusts, the provincial government on Monday said that it has prepared an inclusive strategy for tackling the pests.

Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (K-P) Minister for Agriculture and Livestock, Mohibullah Khan on Monday presided over a meeting to review the agriculture department's response to battling swarms of locusts.

Agriculture Secretary Israr Khan, Agriculture Extension Director-General Abid Kamal and other senior officials attended the meeting.

The provincial agriculture minister was briefed on the presence of locusts and measures to control it.

The minister was told that teams have been formed at the district level where locust swarms are present.

At least 25,833 acres of land has been sprayed with insecticides in 15 districts of the province to control the locusts, the minister was told.

To further control the roving swarms of locusts, Mohibullah was told that aerial spray will also be conducted.

The locusts entered K-P through Sherani, Mosakhel and Zhobs districts of Balochistan on January 25 this year and since then have spread to several southern districts of the province.

As a result, the provincial government had been forced to impose an emergency in all locust-hit districts of K-P on January 28. The emergency was later extended to other districts of the province which were affected by locusts.

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<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2219416/1-k-p-chalks-strategy-battle-locusts/>

CS ORDERS GOVT DEPTS TO COLLABORATE TO COMBAT LOCUSTS

By APP Published: May 12, 2020

LAHORE: Punjab Chief Secretary Jawwad Rafique Malik on Monday directed the departments concerned to work collectively on scientific lines to combat locust. "These departments include Provincial Disaster Management Authority (PDMA), Agriculture, Livestock and Forest."

He expressed these views while presiding over a meeting to review steps to control locust in the province. Senior Member Board of Revenue (SMBR) Babar Hayat Tarar, Agriculture secretary, PDMA director general and senior army officers attended the meeting. The SMBR told the meeting that 150 vehicles and 260 motorcycle were being used for spray in locust-affected areas and so far 114,406 hectares of land had been covered.

As many as 760 solo power were also being utilized for carrying out spray, he added. He further said that a working group headed by SMBR and comprising secretaries of different departments including Finance, Agriculture, Livestock and Forest was supervising the situation.

Similarly, a core committee consisting of Agriculture DG, PDMA DG, representatives of army and Cholistan Development Authority was working against the pest.

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<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2219454/1-cs-orders-govt-depts-collaborate-combat-locusts/>

ECC READY TO APPROVE FARM PACKAGE

By Zafar Bhutta Published: May 12, 2020

ISLAMABAD: The Economic Coordination Committee (ECC), which is scheduled to meet on Wednesday, is set to approve a Rs56-billion bailout package for the agriculture sector amid the growing impact of Covid-19 pandemic.

The government has already announced a stimulus package of over Rs1.2 trillion to cushion the impact of Covid-19. Out of this, Rs100 billion has been earmarked for giving relief to small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and the agriculture sector.

The Ministry of National Food Security and Research has prepared a package of incentives for farmers in various sub-sectors of the agriculture sector to help them to cope with the impact of Covid-19. The ministry has submitted its proposals for ECC's consideration.

The food security ministry has proposed a subsidy of Rs925 per bag of di-ammonium phosphate (DAP) and other phosphoric fertilisers and Rs243 per bag of urea and other nitrogen fertilisers. Total subsidy cost will be Rs37 billion.

Agrarian dilemma: Is the smart subsidy really smart for Pakistani farmers?

The subsidy scheme will be implemented by the provinces and funds will be disbursed through the scratch card scheme, already being implemented by Punjab. The subsidy on fertilisers has been proposed for the Kharif crop (April-October).

At present, the government gives subsidy to fertiliser manufacturers on gas supply that is said to be not fully passed on to consumers. This time, the government has decided to give a direct subsidy to the farmers.

Farmers have been facing high-interest rates of up to 18.4% on bank loans. This has been a major problem that has caused losses to them over the past few years as they cannot add adequate inputs to crops.

Now, the government has decided to reduce the mark-up on loans. However, the proposed rate of interest is still high that the farmers may not be able to afford.

At present, the mark-up on agricultural loans provided by Zarai Taraqati Bank Limited is 18.4%. A reduction to 10% has been proposed for 2020 for ECC's approval. The mark-up subsidy will require Rs8.8 billion.

A subsidy of Rs150 per kg of cottonseed has been recommended for the Kharif 2020 crop season in Punjab and Sindh. This subsidy will require an amount of Rs2.3 billion.

Another subsidy of Rs300 per bag of pesticides, meant for combating white fly, has been proposed. The subsidy will cover five million acres in Punjab and Sindh, which is around 80% of the cotton area. The total cost of the subsidy will be Rs6 billion.

The food security ministry has proposed 5% sales tax subsidy on locally manufactured tractors for one year. The total cost of the subsidy will be Rs2.5 billion. Sources said the finance ministry had endorsed the subsidy for the agriculture sector.

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<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2219479/2-ecc-ready-approve-farm-package/>

CHICKEN PRICES SHOOT UP

Aamir Shafaat Khan May 13, 2020

KARACHI: Retailers have raised the prices of chicken beyond the reach of many people as the live bird is selling at Rs230-240 per kg and meat at Rs350-400 per kg, showing an increase of Rs70-80 a kilo over the past few days.

Surprisingly, the official rate of live bird and its meat is Rs138 and Rs214 per kg but shopkeepers have neither displayed the price list, nor are they selling the bird at the control rate.

Poultry retailers are demanding Rs600 for boneless chicken as compared to Rs500 per kg.

Poultry traders say that prices usually crash on low demand and soar on high demand, but here they link the price hike to a short supply of birds from farms.

General secretary of the Sindh Poultry Wholesalers and Retailers Association Kamal Akhtar Siddiqui said in last week of March, poultry industry had warned consumers regarding price hike in coming months because farmers were not putting day-old chicks at their farms owing to massive decline in sale due to closure of wedding halls, restaurants, hotels, barbecues, etc, during the lockdown which was imposed in third week of March to control spread of coronavirus.

He said wholesale price of live bird had risen to Rs210 from Rs140 and meat to Rs367 from Rs245 per kg.

“Despite price hike, poultry is still cheaper when compared with veal meat prices of Rs600-700 per kg (with and without bones) and mutton at Rs1,200 per kg,” he said adding that even good quality fish was selling at Rs700 per kg.

The government had allowed online sale of food during limited hours slightly offsetting the negative impact of low chicken sale to some extent.

A number of people prefer to make chicken-related dishes at home rather than taking risk of ordering online food in view of lingering coronavirus threat.

Consumers are now paying the price of huge losses of poultry sector's declining sales in March and April and the government's price control machinery does not exist to rescue consumers, some observers said.

The government has remained focused towards dealing with the opening of different trades and finalising standard operating procedures (SOPs) for various industries since the start of lockdown.

However, with or without price list, stakeholders had continued to challenge the government's writ in selling products on their own terms.

There is literally no fear among shopkeepers, wholesalers and product manufacturers to face any strict action like heavy fines or imprisonment against price hike, the observers added.

The Pakistan Poultry Association (PPA) in last week of March said that hatcheries had stopped setting eggs for chick production amid depressed sales.

Egg layers had also been culled, which was already showing signs of short supply of eggs.

Broiler breeders, which were consuming feed, had been sold at throwaway prices for meat.

From the above situation, birds supply in the markets would remain in short supply in coming months.

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RAHU REITERATES NEED FOR CENTRE'S HELP TO KEEP LOCUSTS AT BAY

The Newspaper's Staff Correspondent May 13, 2020

HYDERABAD: Sindh Minister for Agriculture Ismail Rahu has apprehended that locusts currently present in many districts of the province could cause heavy damage to the agriculture sector if not eliminated before rainfall.

"It's the most dangerous enemy we are faced with after Covide-19," he remarked while chairing a meeting of agriculture extension officials and later addressing a press conference at Shahbaz Hall here on Tuesday.

Mr Rahu was of the view that locusts would inflict a heavy loss to agricultural produce in Sindh and Punjab in the next few months as monsoon was approaching. The loss would ultimately cause food insecurity on a large scale, he added.

"It's a major issue as the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and other international forums have already warned that locusts could attack Pakistan 10 times this year," the minister said.

He told the meeting that the federal government should help Sindh carry out aerial spray to eliminate locusts' swarms that had already devoured standing crops and green patches in many districts and were a potential threat to remaining agricultural fields in Sindh.

He noted that the swarms were constantly attacking certain districts over the past two months.

He recalled that the federal government had declared a 'national emergency' in January this year and prepared a national action plan to deal with the menace in three phases. "The first phase is near completion but no significant success has been achieved so far," he pointed out, and regretted that no effective action was being taken while only meetings after meetings on the issue were being held.

The minister quoted surveys, conducted by some international organisations, suggesting that 300,000 square kilometre area of Pakistan could come under locust attack. The areas identified in the surveys were 50pc of Balochistan, 35pc of Sindh and 15pc of Punjab. "This means that 100,000sq-km area is vulnerable and 50,000sq-km area has already come under attack or threatened by the swarms existing in Sindh," he said.

He, however, noted that this time, locusts swarms in Sindh appeared to be in transition and that was why they did not cause a huge loss to crops but during and after rainfall, they would definitely pose a serious threat to farmlands in the province. "The swarms are flying towards India but very likely to return in the rainy season," he said, adding that myriads of swarms did exist in Iran as well and could enter Pakistan via Balochistan.

"We apprehend a three- or four-pronged invasion by locusts from the desert areas of Sindh targeting seven districts and this would be an alarming situation," he said.

Mr Rahu called for effective and coordinated joint efforts by his department, federal plant protection department, National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) and other relevant departments to face the challenge. He noted that the army also stood by the Sindh government in this exercise.

Explaining Sindh's position in this context, the minister said aerial spray was the most effective method but there was only one aircraft without a pilot made available to the provincial government against the actual requirement of six each with a pilot. He said the available aircraft was meant for aerial spray in Sukkur district while five other ones were required for such operations in three other districts — Hyderabad, Mirpur-khas and Shaheed Benazirabad. Also, against the requirement of 25 sprayer-mounted vehicles, only five were made available to Sindh, he added.

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OTTON PRODUCTION SLIDE

By NUZHAT NAZAR on May 13, 2020

The Federal Cabinet on Tuesday decided that the support price of cotton should be fixed after thorough consultations with all the stakeholders in order to encourage farmers to sow more and more cotton as its cultivation has been woefully declining.

Prime minister Imran Khan, who chaired the cabinet's meeting, was in favour of giving subsidies on cotton seed and fertilizer, so that poor growers could benefit.

The cabinet also decided to amend laws on appointment of heads of various government institutions and autonomous bodies in the country. It also reviewed the audit reports relating to alleged embezzlement in the affairs of Karachi Port Trust (KPT).

After the federal cabinet meeting, Information Minister Senator Shibli Faraz, while giving a news briefing, said that a seven-point agenda was discussed in the cabinet meeting.

The information minister said a committee has been constituted to frame a law with regard to appointment of heads for government entities.

He said the committee will work under the supervision of Advisor for Institutional Reforms Dr Ishrat Hussain, which will present its recommendations within a week.

He said Minister for Narcotics Control Azam Khan Swati presented 39 proposals to the prime minister on electoral reforms, which the prime minister appreciated.

The information minister said the decisions of the Cabinet Committee on Energy were ratified in the meeting, while the prime minister directed to expedite the reforms in the energy sector.

Shibli Faraz also said that the PTI is the only party, which has introduced reforms in the electoral process, while reforms in the energy sector are the government's priority.

The information minister said the cabinet approved the names of the National Commission for the Status of Women but the members would be decided by the prime minister.

He said that the cabinet had approved the application of Pakistan Essential Services Act, 1952, on all employees of the National Institutional Facilitation Technology and the approval had been given for six months.

Shibli Faraz also said that the cabinet approved the appointment of member National Accounts and member Census in the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, and also approved the audit to rectify the irregularities in the affairs of the Karachi Port Trust (KPT).

The cabinet approved the names of the members of the National Commission for Status of Women and National Bureau of Statistics.

It also approved decisions taken by the Cabinet's Committee on Energy and Economic Coordination Committee.

The information minister said the cabinet reviewed matters pertaining to audit survey regarding embezzlement in Karachi Port Trust.

Senator Shibli Faraz said Prime Minister Imran Khan also sought a report regarding illegal and unlawful appointments in 12 different ministries within one week.

Talking about the coronavirus challenge, the minister said no country in the world can afford continuous lockdown, and a decision regarding ease in countrywide lockdown was taken in view of difficulties being faced by poor labour class.

He said the government has limited resources and infrastructure, and continuous lockdown was not possible under the prevailing conditions.

The minister urged the citizens and members of the civil society to adopt all necessary precautionary measures, follow guidelines and the SOPs, and support government in its endeavors to contain the pandemic.

APP adds: The PM said all the lacunas in the election laws would be addressed so that the people's trust in the election process was restored and nobody could raise a finger on the transparency of election. A transparent and credible electoral process was the foundation of democracy and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) was the only party which had taken serious efforts and practical steps for electoral reforms.

Expressing the government's commitment, the prime minister directed to intensify efforts so that electoral reforms process should be completed as soon as possible.

Shibli Faraz said the cabinet discussed the issue of unlawful appointments made in various ministries during the previous governments. It transpired that appointments without any cabinet approval were made in 12 ministries. Expressing his serious concern, the prime minister directed all the ministries to share details in next cabinet meeting so that action could be taken on the issue.

Senator Shibli Faraz said the cabinet also approved the names of the members of National Commission on the Status of Women, including Shaista Bukhari from Punjab, Habiba Hassan from Sindh, Rubina Naz Advocate from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Fatima Iqbal from Balochistan, Madhiha Sultana from AJK, Sosan Aziz from Gilgit Baltistan and Asia Azeem from the Federal Capital.

The minister said the PM directed steps for provision of energy to the consumers at affordable rates and reduction of the circular debt. He also directed the minister for energy to complete the process of reformation in various departments of the ministry with a time line.

He said Minister for Planning and Development Asad Umar gave a briefing on the steps being taken to control the coronavirus in the country and presented the report on the situation after relaxation in the lockdown.

Imran Khan remarked that activities in the construction and other sectors had even been allowed by the developed countries keeping in view the ground realities. Keeping the economy afloat and balancing security measures was imperative, he added.

Shibli Faraz it was observed that generally the people did not adopt precautionary measures and the cabinet appealed to them to strictly follow the standard operating procedures (SOPs) as the country could not afford a surge in the coronavirus cases.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/13/596489/country-on-the-brink-of-a-wheat-crisis-pbif-chief/>

PPA OPPOSES PUNJAB GOVT'S BID TO CONTROL POULTRY PRICES

By RECORDER REPORT on May 13, 2020

Pakistan Poultry Association (Northern Region) has urged the Punjab government to allow the free-market mechanism to regulate demand and supply instead of intervening in market prices.

PPA (Northern Region) Vice Chairman Chaudhry Muhammad Fargham while talking to media persons here on Tuesday said the industry was very hurt and depressed by the Punjab government's action of controlling the prices of live chicken and meat. He claimed that the commissioner animal husbandry in the ministry of national food security had submitted cost of production to the Chief Justice of Peshawar High Court as far back as in March 2012 at Rs 31.27 for day old chicks and Rs 132.50/kg for broilers. The current costs are around Rs 45 for day old chick and Rs 160 for broilers. As per calculation of Director PRI Rawalpindi, the cost of production is Rs.145 per kg live.

The association kept the government fully abreast of the situation through different means and said it would lead to an acute shortage of poultry products as the losses would result in a reduction in production and that prices will shoot up. "We had advised the government that in the event of an increase in price, supply would partially but gradually increase to

some extent. We had strongly advised the government not to intervene in free-market mechanism but the governments paid no heed," he added.

He said now the market is allowing surviving farmers to recover their losses, the administration is arresting the sellers of chicken meat and forcing them to sell meat at Rs 260/Kg. Such actions would lead to long term closure of poultry farms, which would lead to not only a tremendous increase in chicken meat prices but also mutton, beef and pulses as well, he warned.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/13/596558/govt-committed-to-fulfill-commitments-under-27th-intl-conventions-tweets-pm/>

LOCUST ATTACKS COULD INCREASE TEN TIMES THIS YEAR, FEARS MINISTER

By RECORDER REPORT on May 13, 2020

Sindh Minister for Agriculture Mohammed Ismail Rahu has said that according to the agriculture experts of the world the swarms of locust attacks could be increased ten times more than those of the last year. He informed that the season of two main crops of cotton and rice was about to start as well as monsoon season was going to start soon which was also the breeding season for locusts as well therefore three months of June, July and August were important in this regard.

This he said while presiding over a meeting about preventive measures for Locust attacks at Agriculture Extension Office, Shahbaz Building, Hyderabad on Tuesday.

The minister further said that swarms of locusts were attacking in Sindh like last year and this danger could not be avoided. He directed the officers concerned for stopping the breeding of locusts in deserted areas of Sindh which according to him could be effective. He said that all resources would be utilized for the elimination of locusts. He asked the officers concerned to take this task as challenge and utilize their expertise and experience to eliminate locusts and save standing crops. He underlined the need for focusing Mirpurkhas, Sukkur and Shaheed Benazirabad divisions situated near to Thar Desert which was the breeding area of locusts.

He said that Sindh Agriculture Department had remained busy for elimination of locusts for one year. Rahu also directed the officers concerned to resolve the problems of growers.

Director General Agriculture Hidayatullah Chajro briefed the meeting about preventive measures for locusts.

The participants of the meeting also gave suggestions for the prevention of locusts. Director Agriculture Shaukat Hussain Mastoi informed the meeting about the present situation of Subzi Mandi and other related issues.

Later Talking to media men, the minister said that the locusts had been present in Sindh for one year and couple of days earlier locusts attacked on crops in different parts of Hyderabad Division. He said that the Sindh government was continuously trying hard to prevent locusts. He informed that the different agriculture institutes of the world issued warning of locusts attacks in our region. He said that after Coronavirus the locusts were the biggest problem for Pakistan, the situation would be worsened in coming days, as locusts from Iran and India could attack in our country, he added. He informed that 57 teams were working for preventing locust attacks and now 41 more teams had been added for this purpose. He said that we were trying to make teams ready at taluka level to spray at any time and added that a helpline

number had also been given to growers to inform about locusts' attack. Replying a question, he said that there was no conflict of Sindh with the federal government, we just demanded to federal Plant Protection Department for aerial spray.

He said that losses to crops were being estimated and soon details would be issued.

To a question, he said that due to Covid-19 the problems were being faced on wheat procurement but the Sindh government would achieve its target of wheat procurement. Replying another question, he said that due to Coronavirus, the export of mangoes would be affected.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/13/596455/locust-attacks-could-increase-ten-times-this-year-fears-minister/>

72 PERCENT OF WHEAT PROCUREMENT TARGET COMPLETED, CLAIMS MINISTER

By RECORDER REPORT on May 13, 2020

Punjab has achieved 72 percent of the 4.5 million tons of wheat procurement target set for the current year while 92 percent of 'baardana' (gunny bags) have been distributed among the farmers.

Food Minister Abdul Aleem Khan said this while replying to the questions of food department during the current session of Punjab Assembly. He said a coordinated policy has been implemented for the procurement of wheat in Punjab which has tried to bring direct benefits to common farmers. He also said that the government has ensured uninterrupted supply of "baardana" to the farmers all over the province. He said he himself is keeping an eye on wheat procurement drive and making on the spot checking of all the procedure and claimed no complaint has been received in this regard.

The Minister said that Punjab has set a target of purchasing 4.5 million metric tonnes of wheat which will be completed ahead of time. He said the Punjab government would also meet the wheat requirement of KPK by purchasing additional wheat while another 5 lakh metric tonnes is also under consideration for an extraordinary situation.

Aleem Khan assured that people of Punjab will not be facing the shortage of food grains. He claimed that the food department is fulfilling its responsibilities and all necessary steps are being taken to meet the requirements. He also answered various supplementary questions of the food department and informed the session about the steps taken by it for the betterment of this sector.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/13/596449/seven-2-percent-of-wheat-procurement-target-completed-claims-minister/>

90% BAGS FOR COLLECTING WHEAT DISTRIBUTED

By Our Correspondent Published: May 13, 2020

LAHORE: Provincial Senior Minister Abdul Aleem Khan has said that a coordinated policy has been implemented for the procurement of wheat in Punjab while trying to bring direct benefits to the farmers.

Replying to lawmakers' questions about the Food Department in the Punjab Assembly, he added that 72 per cent target of the procurement of wheat has been achieved in Punjab, while the distribution of 92 per cent bags to farmers has been completed for the purpose so far.

The minister said the Punjab government has ensured uninterrupted supply of sacks to the farmers all over the province this year. He told the house that he had inspected the wheat procurement drive and found no complaint on the ground.

He said Punjab has set a target of purchasing 4.5 million tonnes of wheat, which will hopefully be completed ahead of time. He said the Punjab government would also meet the wheat requirement of K-P besides. He said the additional purchase of 500,000 tonnes is also under consideration to meet an extraordinary situation.

The minister said illegal transportation of wheat in Punjab has been strictly curtailed and largescale operations have been carried out against hoarders without any discrimination.

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<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2220247/1-90-bags-collecting-wheat-distributed/>

FLOUR CRISIS FEARED AS PRICE GOES UP

Ali Hazrat Bacha May 14, 2020

PESHAWAR: The price of a 20kg wheat flour bag went up by Rs30 here on Wednesday as the local millers stopped supplies to hundreds of points selling flour in different parts of the provincial capital at subsidised rate.

Flour dealers of the main Rampura Market told Dawn that 20kg bag of mixed quality flour was sold for Rs920-Rs930 in the wholesale level against the previous rate of Rs870-Rs880 and the 20kg fine atta bag at Rs1,000.

The Bara Road wholesalers and retailers were found to have fixed the price at will.

According to the dealers, sales points were set up in different localities to provide flour to people at the controlled price of Rs808 per bag but they're closed at the moment.

They said wheat supply from Punjab had been suspended to the mills of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa leading to the closure of sales points.

Millers insist situation caused by halt to wheat supply from Punjab

The dealers said the flour price had increased in Punjab, where millers continuously demanded increase in wheat quota at the subsidised rate but the government didn't do so.

They added that the dealers of KP, too, had to purchase wheat at high price.

Meanwhile, the Pakistan Flour Mills Association, Khyber Pakht-unkhwa, has warned a halt to the grinding of wheat over the suspension of supplies at subsidised rate from the provincial government.

It also feared a severe flour crisis in the province after Eidul Fitr.

"All of our 180 flour mills are to stop the grinding within a couple of days due to ban on wheat supply from Punjab KP flour mills," association president Haji Mohammad Iqbal told Dawn.

He demanded the lifting of the ban on wheat supply from Punjab to KP to control flour price hike.

Meanwhile, the millers led by Mohammad Naeem Butt and office-bearers of the Sarhad Chamber of Commerce and Industry also held a meeting at the chamber's offices with SCCI president Engineer Maqsood Anwar Pervaiz in the chair.

They demanded of Chief Minister Mahmood Khan to intervene and ensure the restoration of wheat supply from Punjab to KP.

The millers said the government of Punjab had imposed an 'unconstitutional' and 'unlawful' ban on wheat transportation to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and that ban was a clear violation of Article 151 of the Constitution.

"Our province is deficient in wheat, so it mostly depends on Punjab to fulfil its needs," a miller said.

He said wheat supply to local mills from the government's godowns had come to a halt and that all mills would be closed under the prevailing circumstances as there was no other option to acquire wheat.

The millers said due to the unavailability of wheat on the market, they were unable to continue supplying flour to the markets at the subsidised price, which had led to the fear of flour shortage across the province.

"We had earlier warned the government to take up the wheat ban issue with Sindh, Punjab and federal governments but they paid no attention," Mr Naeem Butt said.

He added that the entire responsibility rested with the provincial government.

The miller alleged that the current performance of the provincial government, especially food department, in the prevailing circumstances was very disappointing.

Mr Maqsood Pervaiz asked the government to lift the 'inter-provincial' ban on wheat supply from Punjab to KP to ensure the timely availability of wheat to local mills and fulfil the requirement of food commodity and avert any flour crisis in the province.

He said the economic and business activities had slowed down due to the prolonged coronavirus-induced lockdown, while the imposition of ban on the transportation of wheat and unavailability of wheat for local mills would lead to the closure of flour industry in the province.

The SCCI chief said the unavailability of wheat for KP flour mills was completely unjust and unbearable and that the ban on wheat transportation should be lifted immediately.

He urged Prime Minister Imran Khan, federal food minister and secretary and other authorities to take an immediate notice of the 'unconstitutional' and 'unlawful' inter-provincial restrictions on wheat supply and ensure the smooth availability of wheat of KP flour mills.

When contacted, food secretary Nisar Ahmad said the province had a stock of over 35,000 metric tons of wheat in its godowns but that was meant for emergency situation only.

"We regularly provide wheat quota to local mills but now Punjab has stopped supplies due to own requirements, so millers have to arrange wheat privately by themselves," he said.

The official said the province's mills had to depend 80 per cent on wheat from Punjab.

“KP markets have flour in sufficient quantity but wheat supply has been stopped by Punjab due to local procurement process,” he said.

The secretary said wheat harvesting had begun in KP, so millers should acquire it to operate mills until the regular supply was made from official godowns.

He said the relevant authorities were well aware of the situation.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556928>

ECC OKAYS RS50BN FOR AGRICULTURE SECTOR

Khaleeq Kiani Updated May 14, 2020

ISLAMABAD: The government on Wednesday approved a Rs50 billion package for the agriculture sector and about Rs17bn additional funds to defence forces to foot extra fuel bills.

The decisions were taken at a meeting of the Economic Coordination Committee (ECC) of the Cabinet, presided over by Finance Adviser Dr Abdul Hafeez Shaikh, that also approved in principle a cell phone assembling policy.

The ECC was given a demand of Rs56.6bn agriculture package to provide the farmers subsidy on fertilisers, reduction in bank mark-up on agriculture loans, subsidy on cotton seed and white fly pesticides and sales tax subsidy on locally manufactured tractors as part Rs100bn earmarked for farmers and small and medium enterprises (SME) out of the Rs1,200bn coronavirus relief package.

However, Shaikh asked the food security ministry to rationalise it to Rs50bn as per its share in the overall Rs100 package announced for the SMEs and the agriculture sector.

He said the ECC had already approved a Rs50bn package for the former to provide indirect cash flow support to nearly 3.5 million people through pre-paid electricity.

Rs17bn set aside for defence forces' fuel bill

Under the agriculture package, about Rs37bn subsidy would be offered to farmers on the purchase of fertilisers. The amount would include a subsidy of Rs925 per bag on DAP and other phosphatic fertilisers and Rs243 per bag on urea and other nitrogen fertilisers.

The ECC was told that the estimated urea offtake would be around 3.04m tonnes while DAP was estimated at 0.95m tonnes for the Kharif season. The subsidy scheme will be implemented by the provinces and the amount will be disbursed through a scratch card scheme already in place in Punjab.

It was also informed that the fertiliser share in the cost of production for major crops was around 10-15 per cent and the provision of subsidy would increase their affordability to adopt the recommended level of fertiliser nutrient use and best agricultural management practices.

Similarly, under the agriculture package, a reduction in mark-up of agri loans at the total cost of Rs8.8bn, subsidy on cotton seed worth Rs2.3bn and white fly pesticides at Rs6bn were also approved.

Furthermore, the ECC called for inclusion of other banks along with Zarai Taraqati in the scheme to enhance outreach of farmers with focus on subsistence farmers with a land holding of 12.5 acres. It was suggested that since markup had been reduced by the State Bank of Pakistan, the interest rates used in the proposal could also be rationalised accordingly.

The ECC called for the implementation mechanism, especially through the scratch card system, to be monitored carefully to ensure that the actual beneficiaries of the package were genuine farmers.

It was also pointed out that since with the provision of subsidy on fertilisers, their demand might increase, the same had to be communicated to the Ministry of Industries and Production (MoIP) in time to make arrangements accordingly.

The meeting approved a proposal by the Poverty Alleviation & Social Safety Division for disbursement of the Special Relief Package for the population living along the Line of Control in a single installment of Rs12,000 for six months from January-June while from July onwards, those families will be given monthly installments of Rs2,000 each until end of December.

The ECC took up different proposals for technical supplementary grants by various divisions and approved one by the Defence Division for a supplementary grant of Rs16.6bn to meet the expenses on POL, utilities and medical stores of the Defence Services.

In addition, it okayed Rs288m for payment of salaries to the employees of Pakistan Machine Tool Factory for the period from October 2019 to June 2020 and Rs40 million to the law ministry for employee-related costs and operating expenditures of the Federal Judicial Academy.

The ECC also discussed the Mobile Device Manufacturing Policy as proposed by the MoIP with the objectives of technology acquisition and localisation of mobile devices through domestic investment, joint ventures, FDIs, creation of 200,000 direct and indirect jobs, price reduction for consumers, increase in digitisation through supporting 4G/5G technologies, development of efficient manufacturing ecosystem, exports of competitively manufactured handsets and achievement of security objectives.

It deliberated upon various components of the policy and approved in-principle with instructions to the MoIP to further fine-tune its various features and incentives for promoting localisation and research and development leading to export of mobile phones.

Lastly, the ECC gave green signal to the release of 35,000 tonnes of wheat from the Pakistan Agriculture Storage and Services Corporation to the Azad Jammu and Kashmir government at Rs1.52bn, including the cost of wheat and incidental charges, to be paid 50pc by the federal administration from the stimulus package announced to fight against Covid-19.

Published in Dawn, May 14th, 2020

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556946>

UREA SALES DECREASE BY 18PC

The Newspaper's Staff Reporter May 14, 2020

ISLAMABAD: Urea sales dropped by 18 per cent to 240,000 tonnes in April compared to same period last year due to the ongoing coronavirus lockdown and locusts attacks in several parts of the country. Overall, urea sales fell by 12pc against the previous month.

Based on the latest sales data shared by the National Fertiliser Development Centre, the urea market seems to be under significant pressure with the accumulation of 850,000 tonnes inventory due to slowdown and other stress faced by agricultural sector.

The fertiliser industry began the year with an opening inventory of 600,000 tonnes. However, the inventory has continued to soar on the back of highest-ever quarterly production of 1.42 million tonnes by the manufacturers and declining sales volume.

If the same trend continues, the urea inventory could surge to an estimated 1m tonnes by the year-end.

This weakening off-take trend, which is expected to continue for rest of the year as well, points out to supply chain disruptions in the agricultural sector and a general slowdown in economy with the real GDP growth possibly contracting by 1.3pc.

Meanwhile, according to analysts have said that to support the farmers amid the Covid-19 crisis, the government is expected to announce a mega agriculture package of Rs63.8 billion for different agriculture related sectors which are hit by the virus outbreak.

Besides the fallout of Covid-19 pandemic, the urea demand is expected to be adversely affected by record locust infestation that threatens to destroy cotton, wheat, maize and other crops.

As a result, the urea consumption is likely to decline by around 10pc to 5.2m tonnes. This demand can easily be met by the production capacity of indigenous gas-based urea manufacturers, which is estimated to touch around 5.8m tonnes in 2020.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556945/urea-sales-decrease-by-18pc>

KP MILLERS DEMAND LIFTING OF BAN ON WHEAT SUPPLY FROM PUNJAB

By AMJAD ALI SHAH on May 14, 2020

Flour millers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have demanded of the federal government to lift ban on wheat supply from Punjab to ensure timely availability of wheat to local mills and fulfill requirement of food commodity and avert to create flour crisis in the province.

The demand was made by a delegation of flour millers, led by Pakistan Flour Mills Association Khyber Pakhtunkhwa chairman Muhammad Iqbal and group leader, Muhammad Naeem Butt during a meeting with Sarhad Chamber of Commerce and Industry president, Engineer Maqsood Anwer Pervaiz on Wednesday.

The flour millers apprised the meeting that the Government of Punjab had imposed 'unconstitutional' and 'unlawful' ban on wheat transportation to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which was clear contradiction of article 151 of the constitution of the country.

“KP is wheat-deficient province, mostly depending on Punjab to fulfill the food requirement in the province, the millers said. On the other hand, they added that wheat supply was stopped to local mills from government godowns and all mills will be shut down under the prevailing circumstances.

The flour millers said owing to non-availability of wheat in market, they are not able to supply flour to the markets, which has led to fear of shortage of flour across the province.

“We had earlier warned the provincial government to take up the issue of ban on wheat supply with Sindh, Punjab and the federal government, but they paid no attention,” Naeem Butt said. He added the entire responsibility now lies on the PTI-led provincial government.

SCCI chief said unavailability of wheat to KP flour mills is completely unjust and unbearable and the ban on wheat transportation should be lifted immediately.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/14/596771/kp-millers-demand-lifting-of-ban-on-wheat-supply-from-punjab/>

NDMA READIES TACKLE LOCUST INFESTATION

OUR CORRESPONDENT May 14, 2020

ISLAMABAD. To avert the impending locust attack, National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) Chairman Lt-Gen Muhammad Afzal on Wednesday said that arrangements have been made for timely land and aerial spray in the stricken regions.

“Around two planes for spraying-out of which one was ordered from Turkey-and five helicopters have been readied to tackle the impending locust attack in the country,” he said while addressing a press conference in Islamabad.

Experts have already warned of severe locust attack in the region. “It is predicted that Pakistan and Iran will face the worst desert locust outbreak in 50 year,” Iranian Ambassador to Pakistan Seyed Mohammad Ali Hosseini had said in an article titled ‘The challenge to food security: a new agenda for regional cooperation’.

Machines have also been installed in the suspected areas, the NDMA chairman said, adding that China has provided spray and sprayers to help Pakistan handle the situation.

Briefing about the relief activities, Lt-Gen Afzal said the government has so far procured over 100,000 tonnes of medical items from China through 11 flights. “To ensure transparency in the buying and delivery of the items all rules were followed,” he added. The government had opted to follow the self-reliant approach for making ventilators and other medical equipment after the demand and prices for such items shot up.

“Because of the NDMA efforts, the production of medical items started in local markets,” he said, “Today we are buying all the stuff from local markets that saved valuable amount of out funds.”

The NDMA chairman said the authority would review the possibility of exporting locally produced medical items after ensuring the availability of 3-4 months of stock.

Lt-

Gen Afzal said: “There is one month of stock available in the NDMA warehouse.”

https://epaper.tribune.com.pk/DisplayDetails.aspx?ENI_ID=11202005140457&EN_ID=11202005140151&EMID=11202005140049

COMMERCE ADVISER TESTIFIES BEFORE SUGAR PROBE COMMISSION

Ishaq Tanoli | Mubarak Zeb Khan Updated May 15, 2020

ISLAMABAD/KARACHI: Adviser to the Prime Minister on Commerce Razak Dawood on Thursday appeared before an inquiry commission investigating a sugar scam and recorded his statement on the decisions taken by the Sugar Advisory Board regarding export of the commodity.

The commission had also summoned Sindh Chief Minister Syed Murad Ali Shah, but he refused to appear before it and said the issue pertained to the province of Punjab.

Mr Dawood is the fifth high-profile figure to appear before the commission looking into the sudden spike in sugar and wheat prices last year. The commission is tasked with issuing a forensic audit report on the 2019 sugar and wheat crises.

Mr Dawood confirmed to Dawn that he appeared before the commission to record his statement, but declined to provide any details. He said he would not talk to the media on the issue.

However, when pressed to share some of the issues raised during the hearing, the premier's adviser said he would make his position clear on Friday (today). "I will issue a statement on May 15 to clarify my position," he said.

Mr Dawood's statement before the commission may be very important given that soon after the release of the first report on the sugar and wheat crises the prime minister took away the portfolio of ministry of industries and production from him and that of ministry of food security from Khusro Bakhtiar. Mr Bakhtiar was later given the portfolio of economic affairs.

Mr Dawood as chairman of the Sugar Advisory Board had proposed to the Economic Coordination Committee (ECC) of the federal cabinet that export of sugar might be allowed. The ECC allowed export of 1.1 million tons of sugar in October and December of 2018.

Out of the total allocation of the quota, only about 750,000 tons of sugar was exported. The average retail price of sugar was Rs53.75 per kilogram in 2017-18, Rs61.43 in 2016-17, Rs64.03 in 2015-16 and Rs58.91 in 2014-15, respectively. The price of sugar increased to about Rs80 per litre when the sugar crisis was at its peak by the end of December 2019.

An increase of Re1 in the price of sugar at the retail level means the net spending of Rs5.1 billion by the consumers. The yearly consumption of sugar in the country is between 5m and 6m tons.

An earlier inquiry report filed by the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) on the crisis had revealed the names of some bigwigs, including Jahangir Tareen, a former secretary general of the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf, and close relatives of leaders of the party's allies, who had allegedly benefited from the crisis.

However, the government constituted the inquiry commission in the first week of April and asked it to submit a forensic audit report on April 25. This deadline was later extended till May 16.

The inquiry commission headed by the director general of FIA, Wajid Zia, had requested Murad Ali Shah twice to appear before the panel.

In response, Sindh's Advocate General Salman Talibuddin sent a letter to the FIA head on Wednesday, in which he said it was evident from the findings of an inquiry committee that all acts of omission and commission responsible for the alarming increase in the price of sugar were centred in and confined to Punjab.

“Given this, we find it difficult to understand why the government of Sindh is being dragged into the quagmire created by the government of Punjab and is being asked to provide a briefing (on) the years 2017-2018 which cannot conceivably have any bearing on the task assigned to the sugar inquiry commission. For your information, during 2017-2018 the price of sugar (was) actually reduced, at least in the province of Sindh,” the letter contended.

It was evident from the inquiry commission's own report that the Sindh chief minister was not asked to appear before the inquiry committee throughout the period in which it was functioning to brief it on the issue of subsidy granted by the provincial government in 2017-18 on the export of sugar over and above the subsidy allowed by the federal government, the letter said.

It said that nobody from Sindh had featured in the inquiry committee's report as having played any part in or being responsible in any way for causing illegal increase in the price of sugar on account of the events that took place exclusively in Punjab.

“It is clear from the report of inquiry committee as well as the contents of DG FIA's letter dated March 16 that all matters falling within paragraph 3(k) of the terms of reference have been inquired into and findings in respect of them have been given and all that has been recommended now (is) the conduct of verification of the source reports through forensic audit and physical stock-taking of a few of the mills identified in the committee's report,” it added.

The provincial law officer in the letter further contended that asking the chief minister to appear before the commission did not fall within its terms of reference set out in the interior ministry's notification issued on March 16. The message asked the FIA chief to immediately withdraw his letters issued on May 11 and 13 on the subject.

Published in Dawn, May 15th, 2020

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1557205>

SMUGGLING, HOARDING POSE THREAT TO FOOD SECURITY: PM IMRAN

By Rizwan Shehzad Published: May 15, 2020

ISLAMABAD: Prime Minister Imran Khan was on Thursday informed of the various measures taken to make the recently promulgated anti-smuggling ordinance more effective.

While chairing a high-level meeting on smuggling, hoarding and profiteering, the premier was told that the ordinance takes stricter measures against elements involved in smuggling of currency and essential commodities.

The meeting was informed that law enforcement agencies had been empowered to take action against smuggling within five kilometres of borders and at airports. The new law also authorised relevant law enforcement agencies to take into custody elements involved in trafficking.

Further, coordination had been improved between district administration, customs officials, security agencies and law enforcement agencies so as to ensure effective prevention of smuggling.

The chairperson of the Federal Board of Revenue briefed the meeting on the steps taken thus far after the implementation of the Anti-Smuggling Ordinance.

The meeting was informed that provincial chief secretaries had been given a detailed briefing on measures to curb smuggling.

Addressing the meeting, the prime minister said that smuggling was a menace to the country's economy. He said that smuggling harms the national economy in two ways. Firstly, it poses a threat to the country's food security causing the public to suffer because of a shortage of basic necessities.

Secondly, said the PM, smuggling causes irreparable damage to the country's industries, that hampers industrial process.

He said there would be no concession or compromise on the action against smuggling.

The prime minister directed all relevant departments to submit reports on the prevention of smuggling and action taken against those involved in the act after every 15 days so that progress in this regard may be continuously monitored.

The provincial chief secretaries apprised Khan on the situation of wheat production, harvesting and overall situation.

The meeting also reviewed the prices of basic commodities, and the provincial chief secretaries also briefed the prime minister in detail about the steps taken to bring down these prices.

Reports on action taken against hoarders and profiteers by the provincial governments was also presented to the prime minister.

Minister for Industry Hamad Azhar briefed the meeting on the efforts being taken to bring down the prices of cement, steel, cooking oil and other essential items.

While directing the provincial authorities regarding possible steps to bring down the prices of basic necessities, the PM said that reducing the prices of petrol, especially diesel. by the government was to provide relief to the people.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2221423/1-smuggling-hoarding-pose-threat-food-security-pm-khan/>

FLOUR MILLERS BEGIN NATIONWIDE STRIKE TODAY

The Newspaper's Correspondent May 17, 2020

TAXILA: The All Pakistan Flour Mills Association (APFMA) has announced a nationwide strike starting today (Sunday) to protest the food department and government's behaviour towards millers, which they say violate the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between millers and the food department.

The association's vice chairman Sheikh Mohammad Saeed and other office-bearers from Punjab told media on Saturday that their mills were being raided, they were being threatened of registration of cases and imposition of fines and were not being allowed to hold wheat for grinding.

Mr Saeed said the central body of the association has called a strike, and millers across the province will stop grinding and supplying flour to markets starting Sunday until the relevant departments assure them they will not raid mills unnecessarily, and that they will allow wheat stock to be held for 72 hours for washing and grinding.

He said that the suspension of the flour supply would hit the public hard in Ramazan if the government does not address millers' grievances.

“Flour millers have given the government and food department adequate time to procure wheat from growers, but the step-motherly attitude of the administration and food department officials is uncalled for, as they are conducting raids in various districts across Punjab and not allowing even 200 bags of wheat to be held for washing and grinding,” he said.

Mr Saeed said flour millers have holding rights to store an adequate stock of wheat, but government functionaries not only confiscate the wheat but also book millers in cases, in violation of the MoU between flour millers and the government.

Sheikh Zeeshan, a member of the Punjab association, said: “We have taken the decision after receiving directions from office bearers of the central executive committee of the association to go on strike from Sunday.”

He added: “This is not a token protest, but a complete shutdown until the demands are met by concerned government departments.”

Published in Dawn, May 17th, 2020

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1557640/flour-millers-begin-nationwide-strike-today>

IMPENDING LOCUST ATTACK ON COTTON

By RECORDER REPORT on May 17, 2020

Impending locust attack on cotton is making cotton growers worry that if the preventive measures will not be taken, this year cotton yield will be low as compared to previous years. The growers of Matiari, Bhtishah, Hala and other surrounding areas of Hyderabad city are under the threat of locust attack.

The agriculture experts and civil society activists are demanding timely measures to counter locust threat. They said that it is another emergency situation for the province much like Covid-19 pandemic. This needs urgent attention for fumigation campaigns against the locust attack.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/17/597740/impending-locust-attack-on-cotton/>

SUDAN INFLATION SOARS TO 99PC AS FOOD PRICES RISE

By Agence France-Press on May 16, 2020

Soaring inflation, a scarcity of foreign currency and a huge public debt are among the country's most pressing challenges.

KHARTOUM: Inflation in Sudan jumped to 99 percent because of rising food prices, official figures showed Saturday, more than a year after the country was rocked by protests sparked by bread price hikes.

The inflation rate in April shot up from 82 percent the previous month due to increased prices of grains, meat, milk and bread, according to the Sudanese Central Bureau of Statistics.

Despite Sudan's political transition, which has raised hopes of more reforms, the economy remains in deep crisis.

Soaring inflation, a scarcity of foreign currency and a huge public debt are among the country's most pressing challenges.

Many in Sudan still have to queue for hours to buy bread.

A tripling of the price of bread was the trigger for the first street protests against long-time autocrat Omar al-Bashir in December 2018.

The mass demonstrations went on for months before the army deposed Bashir on April 11, 2019.

Last month, Sudanese authorities announced an increase in bread prices, meaning one Sudanese pound (about two US cents) now buys only a 50-gram loaf of bread, compared to one weighing 70 grams previously.

<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/16/597650/sudan-inflation-soars-to-99pc-as-food-prices-rise/>

SURGING LOCUST ATTACKS POSE GREAT THREAT TO FOOD SECURITY

By Agencies Published: May 17, 2020

While the government and the urban population are struggling against the speedily spreading Covid-19, farmers in Pakistan's main food-producing pockets have been haunted by a plague of locust swarms which are sweeping green fields with their devastating instinct to eat heavily.

Locust swarms triggered panic among villagers in Punjab as their crop was fine one evening but a lot of leaves had been eaten up a day later. They fear that if the situation prevails it would finish all cash crops, animals' fodders and fruits like it did with wheat crop in Sindh.

The desert locust plague affected Pakistan's southern Sindh province last year before moving to the rest parts of the country. The Ministry of National Food Security and Plant Protection and other departments all came up with a response to the fly attacks.

Assistant Director of Agriculture Pest Warning in Chakwal district Muhammad Riaz told Xinhua that the swarm, scattered in two groups, had affected around 400 acres crops in less than 48 hours, posing a big threat to crops in the area.

According to the food security ministry, the locusts has imposed a loss of 15% to the winter-sown crops last year amounting to at least Rs100 billion, with fears that the damage would be huge if the next generation hatched.

The report added that the locust attacks could cause Rs817 billion loss to the country's agriculture production in 2020. The United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization estimates agricultural losses to Pakistan from locusts could be as high as \$2.2 billion for winter crops alone.

Earlier in January, the government imposed a national emergency on locust control. This week, the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) said the department has planned to spray 500,000-hector land because the numbers of locusts are increasing earlier and speedily.

The FAO said in its latest update that adult groups were migrating to the Indian border from breeding areas in Balochistan and the Indus Valley where hopper groups had been present as well as in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

It added the situation was also threatening in Iran where hopper bands are maturing along the southwestern coastal plains and another generation of breeding was underway on the coast near Jask and in the interior of Sistan-Balochistan province, which borders Pakistan.

In India, more adult groups and small swarms arrived from Pakistan in the past few days and moved east into Rajasthan, reaching Jodhpur. Some swarms could continue further east. Control operations are underway in all three countries.

The Iranian media quoted an agricultural ministry official as saying that Tehran might use the military for a second year to help fight locusts in the south of the country, as the swarms threaten to destroy crops worth more than \$7 billion.

Mohammad Reza Mir, a spokesman for the ministry's Plant Protection Organisation (PPO), said this week that the desert locusts had attacked more than 494,000 acres of orchards and farmland in seven of Iran's 31 provinces, the semi-official news agency ILNA reported.

The affected areas, stretching from eastern Iran on the border with Pakistan to the southwestern border with Iraq, were likely to soon increase to 1 million hectares, Mir told ILNA. "The military have promised to help fight the desert locusts, including by providing all-terrain vehicles for use in areas which are hard to access," Mir told ILNA.

PPO's head, Mohammad Reza Dargahi, said last month that locust swarms threatened 1,250 trillion rials (\$7.4 billion) worth of agricultural products across six provinces in southern Iran, the daily Financial Tribune reported.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2223232/1-surg-ing-locust-attacks-pose-great-threat-food-security/>

PUNJAB'S AGGRESSIVE WHEAT POLICY RILES UP MILL OWNERS

By Aamir Naveed Published: May 17, 2020

LAHORE: While flour mills have increased the prices of their product due to non-availability of wheat at official rates, the food department has adopted an aggressive strategy to meet the procurement target.

However, the Flour Mills Association has announced a strike in Punjab against raids on mills by the Food Department.

Pakistan Flour Mills Association's Central Chairperson Asim Raza, while talking to The Express Tribune, said that the staff of food department is harassing the owners and conducting raids on mills.

The department has allowed mills to store wheat for 72 hours of threshing but they do not even have wheat for 48 hours of threshing. Despite this, the district administration and food department officials are raiding the mills and picking up wheat.

He maintained that the officers of the food department are unnecessarily harassing the owners of flour mills to achieve their target.

He also said that wheat purchased from other parts of the province is not being allowed to reach Lahore. Raza said raids were carried out on flour mills in Multan, Dera Ghazi Khan, Sargodha, Gujrat and other areas and cases were being registered against the owners.

He alleged that after entering a mills in Sargodha, officials had asked the management to buy 50,000 sacks of wheat. Similarly, vehicles carrying wheat were being seized at the gates of mills in DG Khan. All the mills in Sargodha have been closed for the last three days.

Raza said flour mills in Sindh were buying wheat freely and also storing it, but those in Punjab were not allowed to buy wheat.

He said the provincial food department was trying to achieve its target by harassing mill owners, which was not possible. He said the owners had decided to close the mills in Punjab.

The mills have increased flour prices by up to Rs2 per kilogramme. The price of a 20kg bag of flour has gone up from Rs805 to Rs825 and that of a 10kg bag from Rs400 to Rs420.

Punjab Flour Mills Association Chairperson Abdul Rauf Mukhtar, while talking to The Express Tribune, said that per maund price of wheat in the open market had increased by more than Rs100.

The government is not releasing wheat and owners are buying wheat from the open market. At present, the per maund price of wheat in the markets is about Rs1,500.

He said flour mills are buying expensive wheat and providing cheap flour to the people. Therefore, an increase in prices was inevitable.

According to sources, the Punjab Food Department had set a target of purchasing 4.5 million metric tonnes of wheat but so far only 3.5 million tonnes has been procured.

Thus, the food department is facing a shortfall of one million tonnes in the procurement. The procurement of wheat is to be completed by the first week of June. The procurement season is coming to an end but the food department does not have time to meet the target due to the coming Eidul Fitr holidays.

Published in The Express Tribune, May 17th, 2020.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2223107/1-punjabs-aggressive-wheat-policy-riles-mill-owners/>

PAKISTAN GETS BIG SHARE IN RICE MARKETS

By APP Published: May 17, 2020

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan has attained a huge space in the global rice market for exporting local rice in potential markets of Middle East, North America and African regions to achieve the target of increasing the agricultural exports, said Adviser to Prime Minister on Commerce Abdul Razak Dawood.

Talking to APP on Saturday, he said that the government intended to uplift exports to their highest level ever and for that purpose, it was taking different measures to reclaim traditional markets besides accessing new ones.

He added that a rice delegation from Mexico would hopefully arrive in Pakistan in June to appraise various rice exporters to attain permission for exporting rice to Mexico.

The adviser said the all members of the Rice Exports Association Pakistan (REAP) should prepare themselves for this opportunity so that maximum exporters could receive approvals for orders in the Mexican market.

Dawood said that rice was the largest agri-export commodity in the country's export basket with a total value of over \$2 billion, which would be increased to \$5 billion in the next five years.

He urged the local rice exporters to introduce new varieties by investing in research and development to enhance production and quality.

Replying to a question, he said that even in the current critical situation, the country's food exports to the Middle Eastern market, especially meat and poultry, have increased compared to the same period of previous year.

Replying to another question, he stressed the need for making preparations to exploit the economic and trade opportunities expected to emerge post Covid-19 pandemic.

“We expect more opportunities to promote bilateral trade and strengthen linkages with potential markets including European Union, China, Middle East and African region besides promoting regional trade in post pandemic environment,” he said.

He underlined that the pandemic would bring a paradigm shift and will create great opportunities, adding that the coronavirus had changed the world and now the business processes would be completely different.

Dawood said that the government was focusing equally on all sectors of the economy including textile, non-textile and agriculture and engineering sectors to build export potential of the country in coming months.

Talking about the external trade situation during the past three months, he said exports had declined in April 2020 by around 54% compared to the same month of last year and the reason behind the decline was obviously the spread of coronavirus across the world.

Dawood said that the government was prioritising ‘Made in Pakistan’ policy to boost local production and reduce dependence on import and enhance exports.

Published in The Express Tribune, May 17th, 2020.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2223039/2-pakistan-gets-big-share-ice-markets/>

NEWS COVERAGE PERIOD FROM MAY 11TH TO 17TH

DIESEL SHORTAGE, POL PRICES CUT MAY HAMPER WHEAT HARVESTING

Amjad Mahmood May 11, 2020

LAHORE: There seems to be no let-up in the miseries of the farmers as the authorities remain apathetic to the diesel shortage being faced by them in the middle of the wheat harvesting season.

Reports of unavailability of diesel in the market had started doing rounds a couple of days after downward revision of the rates of petroleum products on April 30 in line with the sharp decline in their prices in the world market.

Almost all oil marketing companies stopped placing orders with the international suppliers as soon as the Oil and Gas Regulatory Authority (Ogra) hinted at proposing a cut in oil prices.

Already suffering because of shortage of labour due to Covid-19 lockdown, wheat growers are facing another unexpected crisis amid the harvesting season in the form of unavailability of diesel to run their tractors and threshing machines. This may lead to delay in harvesting.

Farmers riding their tractor-trolleys and pick-ups carrying barrels and jerry cans can be seen queuing up at the filling stations to get diesel, particularly in Bhakkar, Layyah and Mianwali districts of Punjab. In most cases, they return empty-handed or get a few litres of diesel.

“At a time when I should have been in my lands to oversee wheat harvesting, I’m forced to line up at petrol pumps to get diesel for my tractor-run thresher,” laments Rana Haider, a farmer from Thal area in Bhakkar.

Talking to Dawn by phone, he says that he has lost his three precious days in search of diesel but failed to find the product and he is paying rent for the threshing machine without using it.

Saeed Baloch, a petrol pump owner in Mianwali, claims the oil marketing companies have introduced quota regimes since April 30 for the first time on the basis of average calculated on the yearly basis and thus are providing them one-fourth of the supplies against the demand.

The companies are also delaying the supplies contrary to their normal routines, he alleges, explaining that he would get oil supply the next day of placing the order. But, since the recent cut in prices, this gap between placement of order and supplies has widened to the minimum four days, creating a severe shortage particularly of diesel, he adds.

He wonders why the government didn’t manage the situation while the state-run Pakistan State Oil had flagged the issued in the first week of May.

An official of the PSO Lahore region alleges that the private oil marketing companies (OMCs) are not supplying petroleum products to their respective dealers and thus the whole pressure has been diverted to the PSO outlets. He says that his entity is supplying one million litres of diesel daily only in Lahore region to meet the wheat harvesting-related demand.

A petroleum dealer, Rehmat Khan Wardag, says OMCs have not placed orders for the import of petroleum products since the recent cut in oil prices. He says the OMCs suffered billions of rupees losses in the process and fears that the volatile situation in the world markets will keep them away from the business in coming weeks, which may lead to severe shortage of oil, particularly diesel, in the local market.

He has urged the government to import oil on its own without delay to fend off the hovering shortage that may plunge the sectors dependent on diesel, particularly the agriculture sector, into a severe crisis.

Published in Dawn, May 11th, 2020

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556190>

FOOD OFFICIAL MANHANDLED BY TOWN COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN FOR INTERCEPTING WHEAT STOCK

Dawn Report May 11, 2020

UMERKOT: Harassment and manhandling of a food department official by Samaro town committee chairman late on Saturday evening sent a wave of anger among food officials across the town. An emergency meeting of senior food officials was held on Sunday to condemn the incident.

It was gathered that food inspector Iftikhar Arain, along with a police team, intercepted a consignment of 1,200 wheat bags of 40-kg each while it was being transported by two trucks to some other district. The action was taken as part of the

ongoing campaign against hoarding/illegal movement of wheat stocks which was causing an artificial shortage of the commodity and wheat flour in the province.

According to Mr Arain, when he impounded one truck-load of wheat and chased the other truck, Samaro town committee chairman, Rafique Ahmed Qaimkhani, who belonged to the ruling Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), along with some other persons intervened and harassed him to deter him from discharging his official duty. "Qaimkhani abused and held me hostage for some time and then slapped me when I did not agree to come to his terms," alleged Mr Arain.

He said he intended to recover more than 14,000 other wheat bags hoarded in his area of operation to prevent the stocks from being shifted to some other district/province in violation of the relevant ban imposed by the provincial government.

Escorted by a police force, the officials recovered more than 1,00,000 wheat bags and sealed off the mills.

Reacting angrily to the incident, senior food officials held a meeting under the chairmanship of Mohammed Hussain Mahar to discuss the issue. Ghulam Nabi Soomro, Iftikhar Arain and other senior officials including heads of all procurement centres in the district attended the meeting.

The meeting condemned the town committee chairman's act of hooliganism as unacceptable. It said Qaimkhani's attempt of obstructing the food official from performing his duty was unlawful. Appropriate action must be taken against him and those who accompanied him in this unlawful act, it added.

The meeting participants said no one was above the law and, as such, could not be allowed to stop any official from performing duty in line with the orders issued by government.

They resolved to stop performing their official duties pertaining to wheat procurement if action was not taken against the offenders.

SUKKUR: Raids were conducted in three flour mills in the Salehpat town as the drive against hoarders of wheat continued in Sukkur district, food officials said on Saturday.

In Jacobabad, district food controller Asghar Soomro along with Assistant Commissioner of Garhi Khero Sanaullah Bhatti carried out a raid on a rice mill in Dao Jahanpur on the orders of Deputy Commissioner Ghazanfar Ali Qadri.

NAUSHAHRO FEROUZE: District food controller Qareebullah Soomro said on Saturday that around 145,500 wheat bags were recovered in raids on several godowns in grain markets of Bhiriya Road, Kandiaro, Mehrabpur and Khan Wahan towns.

The raiding team found more than 20,000 wheat bags clandestinely stocked there. The stocks were seized and the rice mill was sealed, the officials said.

He told local reporters around 40,000 wheat bags were recovered in Khan Wahan, 35,000 in Mehrabpur, 11,500 in Kandiaro and 60,000 in Bhiriya Road.

All the godowns were sealed, he added.

Published in Dawn, May 11th, 2020

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556097/food-official-manhandled-by-town-committee-chairman-for-intercepting-wheat-stock>

SUKKUR NAB READIES FOUR REFERENCES ON WHEAT SCAM

The Newspaper's Correspondent May 11, 2020

SUKKUR: The Sukkur region of the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) has prepared four references concerning misappropriation of billions of rupees worth of wheat in food department and is ready to file them in accountability court, according to sources.

Sources in the NAB said the references would be filed after seeking formal approval of the bureau's chairman. In this connection, a meeting of NAB's regional board presided over by its Sukkur director general reviewed the scam in Sukkur, Larkana and Shaheed Benazirabad divisions and accorded approval to the references prepared against the corrupt officials of food department.

The sources said the NAB chairman himself had issued directives to file the references over growing complaints about large-scale corruption in food department in different districts of the province.

The sources said that a reference accused deputy director food Anees-ur-Rehman Mahar, district food controller Mohammad Iqbal Memon and others of Rs128 million corruption and another reference blamed Khairpur district food controller Mohammad Ali Ujjan and others of more than Rs58m graft in the stored grain.

The third reference accused Larkana district food controller Zahid Ali Unnar and others of Rs870m corruption and the fourth blamed Kandhkot-Kashmore's deputy director of food Fazal Mohammad Bhangwar and others of more than Rs74m graft.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556096/sukkur-nab-readies-four-references-on-wheat-scam>

IT'S A SEASON OF MANGOES AND COVID-19

Mohammad Hussain Khan May 11, 2020

THE season of the king of fruits — mangoes — has started. But this year, it starts amidst serious concerns of coronavirus spreading in Sindh's rural areas since thousands of labourers arrive from South Punjab, mainly Muzaffargarh. Under the current circumstances, allowing them to enter Sindh is risky since this may allow the contagion to spread in rural areas which, by and large, have remained safe compared with urban areas.

To harvest mangoes, big orchard owners let out their farms to contractors. Punjab's labourers – hired by the orchard contractors – have begun to arrive in Sindh's mango farms, which are larger, through different means of transport, while consignments from these farms have started reaching Punjab.

Till May 7, the Sindh government was debating standard operating procedures (SOPs) to let these workers enter the province. Draft SOPs have been presented to the Sindh government by Sharjeel Inam Memon, an orchard owner who is a Sindh Assembly member from Hyderabad's rural area. He had raised this issue of Punjab's labourers with the government as they turned up in thousands.

“I have discussed SOPs with the Sindh chief minister and he has not yet finalised them. We are trying to see the situation is handled adroitly,” says Mr Memon, an influential member of Sindh's ruling party.

Among other measures, the 11-point draft recommends that growers/contractors provide a list of workers from other provinces. It also states enrollment forms will have to be filled and submitted before revenue officials within five working days of labourers commencing work. Items such as gloves, masks and hand sanitisers have to be provided to those working along the entire mango value chain.

Every grower has to try to engage the maximum number of local labourers and minimise hiring from elsewhere for plucking and packing purposes. If a worker develops Covid-19 symptoms, he has to be sent for a checkup. A proforma has to be filled by each worker for tracking and tracing purposes.

‘There is no rocket science involved which would prevent local labour from learning to pluck or pack mangoes. Previously, nobody thought of departing from the conventional practice of labour coming in from Punjab to Sindh because there was no reason for it’

The Sindh government is continuously resisting pressure from the PTI-led federal government, as well as the business community, to ease the lockdown. The chief minister had even differed, rightly so, with the 20-point SOPs mutually agreed between the ulema and President Arif Alvi on Taraweeh prayers in Ramazan to stem the spread of the contagion. He feared the SOPs will not be implementable therefore sought to restrict prayer congregations.

Currently, Sindh health officials dealing with the Covid-19 situation and pandemic trajectory believe May is going to be tough from the point of view of a spike in the number of cases. “We are bracing for an exponential rise in cases if the lockdown is eased,” observes a Sindh health official associated with monitoring the Covid-19 situation. “The impact of the decision taken for opening up of businesses will be seen after a fortnight,” he asserted.

Labourers have already started to arrive unchecked in Sindh from Punjab where an upward trend in the number of cases can be seen, and more are on their way. It is a foregone conclusion that the SOPs specific to mango workers will not be doable, any more than those that were drafted for prayer congregations.

“I think this is an opportunity that can bring local labourers forward and help overcome unemployment currently seen in the pandemic’s backdrop,” says Sindh agriculture minister Ismail Rahu, who is the son of hari leader Fazil Rahu. The real issue, he opines, pertains to big farms that are let out to contractors who hire workers from Punjab. “One expert worker brought from Punjab for each farm should be enough, the rest should be purely local labourers to handle the mango crop this season. This is how they will get trained as well,” he remarks.

The issue of workers from Punjab coming to Sindh has surfaced for the first time because of the pandemic, otherwise, it was conventional practice for orchard owners and contractors. Locally known as bharawa and thukawa, labour from Punjab has picked, sorted and packed mangoes with dexterity for years.

The contractors’ argument is since available local labour is not trained, engaging them would cause mango wastage and result in monetary losses. Therefore, this issue is more of contractors than of orchard owners.

Labour from Punjab arrives in groups of 40-50 people. Depending on the size of an orchard, multiple teams work together, switching from one farm to another if need be. They stay at farms and leave once the season is finished, awaiting the arrival of kinnow season in Punjab.

“There is no rocket science involved which would prevent local labour from learning to pluck or pack mangoes. Nobody thought of departing from conventional practice before because there was no reason for it,” remarks Sindh Abadgar Board vice president Mahmood Nawaz Shah, who is also an owner of mango orchards and an exporter. To quote a medium-sized mango grower Nadeem Shah, Punjab’s labour is cheap as well as trained.

The Sindh government remained worried till all the men from Tableeghi Jamaat – who became virus carriers in the province in March – recovered and were repatriated home. The government's efforts to ensure safe transportation was praised. Given its lockdown policy, it is unlikely that the Murad Shah-led government will have two different standards relating to the same emergency.

While things are challenging this year, it is an opportunity to engage local labour so that they get trained and there is less reliance on workers from another province next season. It would not be difficult for the locals to learn the art of sorting and plucking since they work in the fields all year round. Is saving mangoes more important than saving lives?

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556252/its-a-season-of-mangoes-and-covid-19>

AGRICULTURAL HARDSHIP UNDER LOCKDOWN

Amjad Mahmood Updated May 11, 2020

THE agriculture sector is facing one of its biggest crises. On one hand, erratic weather and the resultant untimely heavy rains and hailstorms, coupled with the locust attack, are making it hard for farmers to sleep at night. On the other hand, the lockdown since mid-March has created many challenges and negatively impacted the rural population in general and small farm holders in particular.

The prolonged shutdown across the country has not only reduced on-farms activities but also disturbed the transport and sale of crops, vegetables and fruits, as well as the purchase of farm inputs.

Livestock, the most important sub-sector which contributes around 60 per cent of agriculture's share to GDP, is the major victim of the Covid-19 outbreak. To meet their day-to-day expenses, small farmers rear milch cattle and sell the milk. Closure of tea-stalls, sweets shops and the reduced timing for milk shops under the lockdown's standard operating procedures (SOPs) shrank demand for this highly perishable commodity and thus cut its rates.

Salahuddin, a smallholder farmer from Narang Mandi town near Lahore, says he gets 72 litres of milk from his nine buffaloes. Before the lockdown, the milkman would give him Rs80 per litre but now is not willing to buy at even Rs50 per litre citing hurdles in the onward sale because of virus issues. Likewise, owner of a known sweet shop in Mian Channu (Khanewal) has his own dairy farm but since he is disallowed to open his business because of the lockdown, he is forced to sell milk at Rs40 per litre in the town, says Pakistan Kissan Ittehad general secretary Mian Umair, who belongs to the area.

Some dairy farmers are turning towards value addition in the form of mozzarella cheese and ghee to prolong milk's shelf life rather than sell it at throwaway prices

Initially suffering at the hands of the milkman, Mr Salahuddin is now trying to find a solution through value addition: he is preparing (mozzarella quality) cheese and trying to sell it online. Even if he doesn't manage to find buyers, this will enhance the shelf life of the milk. Similarly, some dairy farmers are making desi ghee out of milk instead of selling the commodity at throwaway prices.

Closure of hotels and the ban on weddings and parties is also hurting the once thriving poultry sector. Vegetables are also being sold at low rates in the wholesale market though end consumers are not benefitting from the low prices as the middlemen are making a killer profit.

“The first month of the lockdown was particularly difficult for farmers as delinked from the markets, they had to sell their dairy and farm products at throwaway prices,” says Farooq Tariq, general secretary of Pakistan Kissan Rabita Committee, a representative of smallholder farmers. “Those engaged in producing horticulture, floriculture and dairy farming were shattered with the losses for being forced to market their commodities at whatever rate offered in the local bazaar.”

Hanf Hanjra, a horticulturist from Sargodha, says previously he earned a good living during the wedding and Ramazan seasons by dispatching his produce to big markets like Lahore and Gujranwala. “However, this time I’m hardly able to meet my expenses because I’m forced to sell my farm produce in the local market at much lower rates as either transport to far-off markets is not available or its charges are unaffordable.” He claims he could not once cover transport charges even for the Sargodha market where his four maunds (around 160kg) of coriander was sold for just Rs70 in wholesale.

Unfortunately, the harvesting season of wheat, politically the most important crop, has also fallen in this time of social distancing. The already scarce manual labour has been further reduced because of mobility issues in the wake of the pandemic. And this gap in demand and supply has pushed up wages of available farmworkers.

“Labour is costlier this year as workers face problems crossing police check-posts erected to curtail the movement of people,” says Mian Umair. Previously, he would pay 160kg per acre of wheat to a worker for reaping his crop and now this rate has gone up to 210kg per acre. Facing issues trying to convince the mostly illiterate labour force to observe social distancing rules, he says he had to hire manpower from as far as Kasur district, more than 200km away from Mian Channu.

The farming sector was also hit because of difficulties in obtaining inputs and the shutdown of agriculture-engineering and allied industries. Though the government has permitted auto workshops to function when the wheat harvesting season sets in, the decision to allow shops of lath machines, spare parts, etc came a bit late in the day and farmers could not get their tractors, tube-wells and allied machines repaired in time. There were also difficulties in procuring medicine for cattle, bemoans Mr Salah.

Mr Tariq regrets that small farmers, one of the hardest-hit class by the lockdown, are not being considered for compensation by the government. He fears that this will lead to the compounding of rural poverty, disabling particularly the landless farmers from the purchase of seed and other farm inputs for the next crop.

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QCCI BACKS FLOUR MILLERS’ DEMAND

CORRESPONDENT May 11, 2020

QUETTA. Quetta Chamber of Commerce and Industry backed Pakistan Flour Mills Association’s demand of lifting inter-district ban on the transportation of wheat in the name of coronavirus lockdown. “Section 144 is imposed across Balochistan to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

However, the ban on inter-district transportation on wheat could cause food shortage in the province,” said QCCI Senior Vice President Badaruddin Kakar in a statement issued on Saturday. Kakar accused the provincial government and food department of deliberately causing wheat turmoil in Balochistan to ruin the provincial flour mill industry.

“Naseerabad, Jhal Magsi and Jaffar districts fulfill wheat requirements of other districts of the province. Despite the fact, Balochistan government making any policy and strategy,” said the QCCI senior vice president in the statement.

He alleged the provincial government for attempting to create wheat shortage to increase flour prices across the province. Criticising wheat procurement policy of the government, Kakar said, "Balochistan produces 80 to 90 million sacks of wheat in a year but the government announced to procure only one million sacks which will ruin the flour mills business in the province.

https://epaper.tribune.com.pk/DisplayDetails.aspx?ENI_ID=11202005110209&EN_ID=11202005110063&EMID=11202005110030

PAKISTAN'S SUGAR POLICY NEEDS REFORMS

By HARI LOHANO Published: May 11, 2020

KARACHI: In the midst of the coronavirus crisis, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government has released the probe commission report on the misuse of sugar and wheat subsidies in the country.

The report shows the power and influence of sugar barons in relation to the country's policy-making. Most of the names mentioned in the report are close associates of the PM, the PTI and the ministers in the government.

PM Imran deserves much credit for the release of the report. He has promised to take decisive action after the probe commission submits its final recommendations.

Findings of the report raise crucial questions about the government's sugar policy and the transparency of its economic policy. How does the sugar policy work? How sugar subsidy benefits only the sugar industry?

Sugarcane is a high-value, rich farmer's crop due its special characteristics. Its per-acre expenses are much higher than any other cash crop.

The time from planting to harvesting is longer. Its marketing chain, from buying seed to arranging tractor trollies for transporting it to sugar mills, negotiating price and finally getting payment, involves very lengthy processes. This favours the rich and better-off farmers as against the cash-starved small landowners.

Pakistan is among the top 10 sugarcane producing countries in the world, with plantations over a million hectares. Sugarcane production accounts for nearly two-thirds of the area in Punjab and a quarter in Sindh.

It uses more of the subsidised agricultural inputs, especially fertiliser and water, than any other crop in the economy. In a highly water-stressed country like Pakistan, sugarcane uses a much higher quantity of water than any other crop.

Between 2013-14 and 2017-18, according to the Economic Survey of Pakistan, the production of sugarcane increased by an impressive 24%, from 67 to 83 million tonnes.

During this period, the area where sugarcane was cultivated increased by 14% from 1.17 to 1.34 million hectares. The average yield per hectare, rising from 57 to 62 tonnes, shows an increase of only 8%.

The area under sugarcane cultivation in Pakistan is the fifth largest in the world after Brazil, India, China and Thailand. Its per-hectare yield, however, is much lower than the other major producers.

Its yield of 62 tonnes per hectare in 2018 was well below the world average of 73 tonnes and even below India's yield of 80 tonnes.

Figures for last year's crop (2018-19), compared with the average performance of crops in the previous five years, showed a decline of 9% in sugarcane cultivation and 6% in production. This decline is mainly attributed to late payments to farmers, shortage of water and an uncertain political environment during the 2018 election.

As in production, Pakistan is among the top 10 countries in consumption of sugar in the world and the biggest consumer of sugar in South Asia. Consumption of sugar is over 25 kg per person per year in Pakistan. In India, it is 20 kg and in China 11 kg.

Pakistan has 89 sugar mills, a much higher number than needed for domestic requirement. Some of these are located in regions where they are economically unviable and environmentally unsuitable.

Most of these mills are owned by very influential and powerful families. They belong to the governing party, the main opposition parties and the families of former generals.

At the time of Independence in 1947, there were only two sugar mills in the country. Until 1970, there were only four.

The mushroom growth of the mills was mainly during General Zia's period of office (1977-1988), when state patronage was provided to create a new business and political class to counter political opposition to his dictatorial rule. Since then, all the major political parties have followed this path and expanded it.

This growth of the sugar industry has had a very adverse effect on the country's other climatically suitable cash crop, cotton, which has been the backbone of the agriculture sector and a major source of foreign currency reserves for the country.

Between 2013-14 and 2017-18, the area under cotton cultivation declined by 4% and its production by 6%. More strikingly, when 2018-19 is compared with the average performance of the crop in the previous five years, its cultivation area has declined by 17% and production fell by two million bales or 20%.

The pricing policy for sugarcane and sugar is based on government intervention in the market through huge public subsidies, direct and indirect, at various levels of production and sale of the commodity.

At the time of harvesting the crop, the government announces a guaranteed minimum price for sugarcane, to encourage farmers to increase the area under cultivation. The government even decides about the movement of the crop – to ensure that sugar mill owners receive plenty of the produce to keep their business viable.

To protect the sugar industry further, the government imposes higher tariffs on sugar imports to "stabilise" prices in the domestic market. In general, the domestic price for sugar remains much higher than the average world price.

In addition, the government provides an export subsidy on sugar in the name of increasing foreign currency reserves.

The government's decision in September 2018 to allow export of sugar, despite early indications of low production in the country, was a continuation of past public policy to protect the industry.

Pakistan exported 0.4 million tonnes of sugar in 2016-17 and 1.6 million tonnes in 2017-18. Moreover, in 2017, during the period of Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) government, the sugar export quota was increased from 0.5 to 2 million tonnes.

There are two prices for refined sugar in the domestic market. One is the ex-mill price, which is the wholesale price at which the mill sells its product to traders and shopkeepers. The other is the retail price of sugar sold to customers at local corner shops and supermarkets – the price paid by common consumers.

The decision to export the commodity caused a hike in both these prices. The ex-mill price increased from Rs52 to Rs54 per kg in January 2019. The retail price, however, increased from Rs56 to Rs59, a rise of 6%.

With the increasing exports, prices increased regularly for domestic consumers. Even after the ban on sugar exports in February, prices remain on the higher side.

Between December 2019 and March 2020, the ex-mill price for sugar increased by 39% to Rs72. In the same period, the retail price increased by 33% to Rs80.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s April 2020 report also mentions that wholesale prices for sugar in Pakistan were over 50% higher in March than the international prices.

The sugar industry has benefitted enormously from the government's policy. In addition to the export subsidy of Rs3 billion by the Punjab government, the sugar mill owners have received extra profit to the extent of Rs85 billion – Rs5.7 billion per month from January 2019 to the end of March 2020.

The above discussion demonstrates that the government's sugar policy distorts the local market. This harms poor the most and inflicts huge costs on the domestic economy. The only beneficiary is the influential and powerful sugar industry.

At the time of pandemic and huge risks to economy, the government should refrain from intervening in the sugar market and consider reforms in the industry through parliamentary procedures and democratic practices.

In this hour of economic crisis, the government should focus more on the protection of poor and welfare of society through the provision of public goods like healthcare and strengthen the social safety nets.

The writer is a PhD from the UK and writes for The Guardian as well

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2218472/2-pakistans-sugar-policy-needs-reforms/>

HAILSTORM DAMAGES WHEAT CROP, ORCHARDS IN BAJAUR

The Newspaper's Correspondent Updated May 12, 2020

KHAR: Rain coupled with hailstorm damaged standing wheat crop, vegetables and orchards in Mamond tehsil of Bajaur tribal district, residents and officials said on Monday.

They said that hailstorm accompanied by rain started just after Iftari and lasted for about one hour.

They said that Dabar, Badan, Shah Goo, Shahi Thangi, Mokha, Kalpanim Kaga, Sewai and other hilly areas were the worst affected.

Local residents told this correspondent that hailstones were very large in size, severely damaging the standing crop of wheat, vegetables and orchards in the region.

They said that the growers were expecting good harvest of wheat crop this year, but hailstones largely damaged it.

District agriculture officer Ziaul Islam Dawar told Dawn that the hailstorm caused extensive damage to wheat crop and vegetables in Mamond tehsil.

Published in Dawn, May 12th, 2020

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556473/hailstorm-damages-wheat-crop-orchards-in-bajaur>

33,000 TONS OF WHEAT RECOVERED DURING RAIDS: MINISTER

By RECORDER REPORT on May 12, 2020

The Punjab Food Department has so far recovered 33,130 tons of stored wheat by raiding 436 storage places in different districts of the province.

The recovered wheat has been seized and action is being taken against the accused under the law, said Senior Minister Punjab Abdul Aleem Khan here on Monday.

The minister said that strict action was being taken against wheat stockpiling across the province and crackdown was being carried out indiscriminately against the elements involved in this heinous crime.

In a briefing session of the food department, Aleem Khan said that for the last two weeks, strict checks were being carried out on the land and river routes of Punjab where smuggling of wheat had been curtailed with the help of the intelligence agencies and Rangers.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/12/596146/three-3000-tons-of-wheat-recovered-during-raids-minister/>

KHARIF SEASON PADDY TO BE SOWN OVER 4.618M ACRES IN PUNJAB

RECORDER REPORT May 12, 2020

SIALKOT: More than 4.618 million acres of land would be brought under paddy crop during Kharif season in various rice growing areas of the Punjab.

Sources in Agriculture department told Business Recorder on Monday that the department had chalked out a well-knitted training programme to create awareness among the growers about the use of recommended seed and proper use of fertilizer to attain the fixed target in Punjab.

In this regard, the department deputed special training teams which were visiting various villages for providing proper guidance and assistance about the use of inputs, nursery sowing and transfer of plants into fields to the rice growers in the Punjab.

In Sialkot district, paddy will be cultivated on 317030 acres of land in Sialkot, Daska, Pasrur and Sambrial tehsils during Kharif season. The paddy would be sown on 91083 acres in Sialkot, 78053 acres in Daska, 103098 acres in Pasrur and 44796 acres in Sambrial tehsils of Sialkot district. Local agriculture department had initiated farmers training programme in 1442 villages of Sialkot, Daska, Pasrur and Sambrial tehsils of Sialkot district. Special training teams were busy to empower rice growers for enhancing per acre yield, sowing of paddy nurseries, utilization of irrigation water, pesticides and fertilizer as well as about the different varieties of paddy in Sialkot district, the sources added.

Some progressive farmers were adopting modern technology for raising rice nursery by automatic machine in plastic trays at local agriculture farm and ready for transplanting by 'Rice Trans Planter' in Bajwat area of Sialkot.

<https://epaper.brecorder.com/2020/05/12/10-page/836745-news.html>

TRADING ACTIVITIES RESUME ON COTTON MARKET

By RECORDER REPORT on May 12, 2020

Trading activities resume on the cotton market on Monday after the closure of more than one and a half months due to the coronavirus lockdown.

Market sources said that traders are hopeful that situation will be improved gradually after the softening of the lockdown by the government.

Cotton analyst Naseem Usman told that both federal and provincial governments should take steps to save the cotton crop from the locust attack. The recent report of Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations warned of a potentially serious food security crisis this year in several regional countries, including Pakistan, due to locust attacks.

It is expected that Pakistan's Rabi and Kharif crops will be badly affected by locust attack. According to the estimates Pakistan's economy has to bear the loss of Rs 669 billion due to the locust attack during the current year.

Naseem Usman said that Spot Rate Committee of Karachi Cotton Association has stabled the spot rate at Rs 8600 per maund. The rate of cotton in Sindh and Punjab is in between Rs 7000 to Rs 8600 per maund. The rate of polyester fiber was decreased by Rs 3 per kg and was available at Rs 157 per kg.

<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/12/596129/trading-activities-resume-on-cotton-market/>

K-P CHALKS OUT STRATEGY TO BATTLE LOCUSTS

By Our Correspondent Published: May 12, 2020

PESHAWAR: After crops in multiple districts were ravaged by locusts, the provincial government on Monday said that it has prepared an inclusive strategy for tackling the pests.

Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (K-P) Minister for Agriculture and Livestock, Mohibullah Khan on Monday presided over a meeting to review the agriculture department's response to battling swarms of locusts.

Agriculture Secretary Israr Khan, Agriculture Extension Director-General Abid Kamal and other senior officials attended the meeting.

The provincial agriculture minister was briefed on the presence of locusts and measures to control it.

The minister was told that teams have been formed at the district level where locust swarms are present.

At least 25,833 acres of land has been sprayed with insecticides in 15 districts of the province to control the locusts, the minister was told.

To further control the roving swarms of locusts, Mohibullah was told that aerial spray will also be conducted.

The locusts entered K-P through Sherani, Mosakhel and Zhobs districts of Balochistan on January 25 this year and since then have spread to several southern districts of the province.

As a result, the provincial government had been forced to impose an emergency in all locust-hit districts of K-P on January 28. The emergency was later extended to other districts of the province which were affected by locusts.

Published in The Express Tribune, May 12th, 2020.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2219416/1-k-p-chalks-strategy-battle-locusts/>

CS ORDERS GOVT DEPTS TO COLLABORATE TO COMBAT LOCUSTS

By APP Published: May 12, 2020

LAHORE: Punjab Chief Secretary Jawwad Rafique Malik on Monday directed the departments concerned to work collectively on scientific lines to combat locust. "These departments include Provincial Disaster Management Authority (PDMA), Agriculture, Livestock and Forest."

He expressed these views while presiding over a meeting to review steps to control locust in the province. Senior Member Board of Revenue (SMBR) Babar Hayat Tarar, Agriculture secretary, PDMA director general and senior army officers attended the meeting.

The SMBR told the meeting that 150 vehicles and 260 motorcycle were being used for spray in locust-affected areas and so far 114,406 hectares of land had been covered.

As many as 760 solo power were also being utilized for carrying out spray, he added. He further said that a working group headed by SMBR and comprising secretaries of different departments including Finance, Agriculture, Livestock and Forest was supervising the situation.

Similarly, a core committee consisting of Agriculture DG, PDMA DG, representatives of army and Cholistan Development Authority was working against the pest.

Published in The Express Tribune, May 12th, 2020.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2219454/1-cs-orders-govt-depts-collaborate-combat-locusts/>

ECC READY TO APPROVE FARM PACKAGE

By Zafar Bhutta Published: May 12, 2020

ISLAMABAD: The Economic Coordination Committee (ECC), which is scheduled to meet on Wednesday, is set to approve a Rs56-billion bailout package for the agriculture sector amid the growing impact of Covid-19 pandemic.

The government has already announced a stimulus package of over Rs1.2 trillion to cushion the impact of Covid-19. Out of this, Rs100 billion has been earmarked for giving relief to small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and the agriculture sector.

The Ministry of National Food Security and Research has prepared a package of incentives for farmers in various sub-sectors of the agriculture sector to help them to cope with the impact of Covid-19. The ministry has submitted its proposals for ECC's consideration.

The food security ministry has proposed a subsidy of Rs925 per bag of di-ammonium phosphate (DAP) and other phosphoric fertilisers and Rs243 per bag of urea and other nitrogen fertilisers. Total subsidy cost will be Rs37 billion.

Agrarian dilemma: Is the smart subsidy really smart for Pakistani farmers?

The subsidy scheme will be implemented by the provinces and funds will be disbursed through the scratch card scheme, already being implemented by Punjab. The subsidy on fertilisers has been proposed for the Kharif crop (April-October).

At present, the government gives subsidy to fertiliser manufacturers on gas supply that is said to be not fully passed on to consumers. This time, the government has decided to give a direct subsidy to the farmers.

Farmers have been facing high-interest rates of up to 18.4% on bank loans. This has been a major problem that has caused losses to them over the past few years as they cannot add adequate inputs to crops.

Now, the government has decided to reduce the mark-up on loans. However, the proposed rate of interest is still high that the farmers may not be able to afford.

At present, the mark-up on agricultural loans provided by Zarai Taraqati Bank Limited is 18.4%. A reduction to 10% has been proposed for 2020 for ECC's approval. The mark-up subsidy will require Rs8.8 billion.

A subsidy of Rs150 per kg of cottonseed has been recommended for the Kharif 2020 crop season in Punjab and Sindh. This subsidy will require an amount of Rs2.3 billion.

Another subsidy of Rs300 per bag of pesticides, meant for combating white fly, has been proposed. The subsidy will cover five million acres in Punjab and Sindh, which is around 80% of the cotton area. The total cost of the subsidy will be Rs6 billion.

The food security ministry has proposed 5% sales tax subsidy on locally manufactured tractors for one year. The total cost of the subsidy will be Rs2.5 billion. Sources said the finance ministry had endorsed the subsidy for the agriculture sector.

Published in The Express Tribune, May 12th, 2020.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2219479/2-ecc-ready-approve-farm-package/>

CHICKEN PRICES SHOOT UP

Aamir Shafaat Khan May 13, 2020

KARACHI: Retailers have raised the prices of chicken beyond the reach of many people as the live bird is selling at Rs230-240 per kg and meat at Rs350-400 per kg, showing an increase of Rs70-80 a kilo over the past few days.

Surprisingly, the official rate of live bird and its meat is Rs138 and Rs214 per kg but shopkeepers have neither displayed the price list, nor are they selling the bird at the control rate.

Poultry retailers are demanding Rs600 for boneless chicken as compared to Rs500 per kg.

Poultry traders say that prices usually crash on low demand and soar on high demand, but here they link the price hike to a short supply of birds from farms.

General secretary of the Sindh Poultry Wholesalers and Retailers Association Kamal Akhtar Siddiqui said in last week of March, poultry industry had warned consumers regarding price hike in coming months because farmers were not putting day-old chicks at their farms owing to massive decline in sale due to closure of wedding halls, restaurants, hotels, barbecues, etc, during the lockdown which was imposed in third week of March to control spread of coronavirus.

He said wholesale price of live bird had risen to Rs210 from Rs140 and meat to Rs367 from Rs245 per kg.

“Despite price hike, poultry is still cheaper when compared with veal meat prices of Rs600-700 per kg (with and without bones) and mutton at Rs1,200 per kg,” he said adding that even good quality fish was selling at Rs700 per kg.

The government had allowed online sale of food during limited hours slightly offsetting the negative impact of low chicken sale to some extent.

A number of people prefer to make chicken-related dishes at home rather than taking risk of ordering online food in view of lingering coronavirus threat.

Consumers are now paying the price of huge losses of poultry sector’s declining sales in March and April and the government’s price control machinery does not exist to rescue consumers, some observers said.

The government has remained focused towards dealing with the opening of different trades and finalising standard operating procedures (SOPs) for various industries since the start of lockdown.

However, with or without price list, stakeholders had continued to challenge the government’s writ in selling products on their own terms.

There is literally no fear among shopkeepers, wholesalers and product manufacturers to face any strict action like heavy fines or imprisonment against price hike, the observers added.

The Pakistan Poultry Association (PPA) in last week of March said that hatcheries had stopped setting eggs for chick production amid depressed sales.

Egg layers had also been culled, which was already showing signs of short supply of eggs.

Broiler breeders, which were consuming feed, had been sold at throwaway prices for meat.

From the above situation, birds supply in the markets would remain in short supply in coming months.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556656/chicken-prices-shoot-up>

RAHU REITERATES NEED FOR CENTRE’S HELP TO KEEP LOCUSTS AT BAY

The Newspaper's Staff Correspondent May 13, 2020

HYDERABAD: Sindh Minister for Agriculture Ismail Rahu has apprehended that locusts currently present in many districts of the province could cause heavy damage to the agriculture sector if not eliminated before rainfall.

“It’s the most dangerous enemy we are faced with after Covide-19,” he remarked while chairing a meeting of agriculture extension officials and later addressing a press conference at Shahbaz Hall here on Tuesday.

Mr Rahu was of the view that locusts would inflict a heavy loss to agricultural produce in Sindh and Punjab in the next few months as monsoon was approaching. The loss would ultimately cause food insecurity on a large scale, he added.

“It’s a major issue as the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and other international forums have already warned that locusts could attack Pakistan 10 times this year,” the minister said.

He told the meeting that the federal government should help Sindh carry out aerial spray to eliminate locusts' swarms that had already devoured standing crops and green patches in many districts and were a potential threat to remaining agricultural fields in Sindh.

He noted that the swarms were constantly attacking certain districts over the past two months.

He recalled that the federal government had declared a 'national emergency' in January this year and prepared a national action plan to deal with the menace in three phases. "The first phase is near completion but no significant success has been achieved so far," he pointed out, and regretted that no effective action was being taken while only meetings after meetings on the issue were being held.

The minister quoted surveys, conducted by some international organisations, suggesting that 300,000 square kilometre area of Pakistan could come under locust attack. The areas identified in the surveys were 50pc of Balochistan, 35pc of Sindh and 15pc of Punjab. "This means that 100,000sq-km area is vulnerable and 50,000sq-km area has already come under attack or threatened by the swarms existing in Sindh," he said.

He, however, noted that this time, locusts swarms in Sindh appeared to be in transition and that was why they did not cause a huge loss to crops but during and after rainfall, they would definitely pose a serious threat to farmlands in the province. "The swarms are flying towards India but very likely to return in the rainy season," he said, adding that myriads of swarms did exist in Iran as well and could enter Pakistan via Balochistan.

"We apprehend a three- or four-pronged invasion by locusts from the desert areas of Sindh targeting seven districts and this would be an alarming situation," he said.

Mr Rahu called for effective and coordinated joint efforts by his department, federal plant protection department, National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) and other relevant departments to face the challenge. He noted that the army also stood by the Sindh government in this exercise.

Explaining Sindh's position in this context, the minister said aerial spray was the most effective method but there was only one aircraft without a pilot made available to the provincial government against the actual requirement of six each with a pilot. He said the available aircraft was meant for aerial spray in Sukkur district while five other ones were required for such operations in three other districts — Hyderabad, Mirpur-khas and Shaheed Benazirabad. Also, against the requirement of 25 sprayer-mounted vehicles, only five were made available to Sindh, he added.

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OTTON PRODUCTION SLIDE

By NUZHAT NAZAR on May 13, 2020

The Federal Cabinet on Tuesday decided that the support price of cotton should be fixed after thorough consultations with all the stakeholders in order to encourage farmers to sow more and more cotton as its cultivation has been woefully declining.

Prime minister Imran Khan, who chaired the cabinet's meeting, was in favour of giving subsidies on cotton seed and fertilizer, so that poor growers could benefit.

The cabinet also decided to amend laws on appointment of heads of various government institutions and autonomous bodies in the country. It also reviewed the audit reports relating to alleged embezzlement in the affairs of Karachi Port Trust (KPT).

After the federal cabinet meeting, Information Minister Senator Shibli Faraz, while giving a news briefing, said that a seven-point agenda was discussed in the cabinet meeting.

The information minister said a committee has been constituted to frame a law with regard to appointment of heads for government entities.

He said the committee will work under the supervision of Advisor for Institutional Reforms Dr Ishrat Hussain, which will present its recommendations within a week.

He said Minister for Narcotics Control Azam Khan Swati presented 39 proposals to the prime minister on electoral reforms, which the prime minister appreciated.

The information minister said the decisions of the Cabinet Committee on Energy were ratified in the meeting, while the prime minister directed to expedite the reforms in the energy sector.

Shibli Faraz also said that the PTI is the only party, which has introduced reforms in the electoral process, while reforms in the energy sector are the government's priority.

The information minister said the cabinet approved the names of the National Commission for the Status of Women but the members would be decided by the prime minister.

He said that the cabinet had approved the application of Pakistan Essential Services Act, 1952, on all employees of the National Institutional Facilitation Technology and the approval had been given for six months.

Shibli Faraz also said that the cabinet approved the appointment of member National Accounts and member Census in the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, and also approved the audit to rectify the irregularities in the affairs of the Karachi Port Trust (KPT).

The cabinet approved the names of the members of the National Commission for Status of Women and National Bureau of Statistics.

It also approved decisions taken by the Cabinet's Committee on Energy and Economic Coordination Committee.

The information minister said the cabinet reviewed matters pertaining to audit survey regarding embezzlement in Karachi Port Trust.

Senator Shibli Faraz said Prime Minister Imran Khan also sought a report regarding illegal and unlawful appointments in 12 different ministries within one week.

Talking about the coronavirus challenge, the minister said no country in the world can afford continuous lockdown, and a decision regarding ease in countrywide lockdown was taken in view of difficulties being faced by poor labour class.

He said the government has limited resources and infrastructure, and continuous lockdown was not possible under the prevailing conditions.

The minister urged the citizens and members of the civil society to adopt all necessary precautionary measures, follow guidelines and the SOPs, and support government in its endeavors to contain the pandemic.

APP adds: The PM said all the lacunas in the election laws would be addressed so that the people's trust in the election process was restored and nobody could raise a finger on the transparency of election. A transparent and credible electoral process was the foundation of democracy and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) was the only party which had taken serious efforts and practical steps for electoral reforms.

Expressing the government's commitment, the prime minister directed to intensify efforts so that electoral reforms process should be completed as soon as possible.

Shibli Faraz said the cabinet discussed the issue of unlawful appointments made in various ministries during the previous governments. It transpired that appointments without any cabinet approval were made in 12 ministries. Expressing his serious concern, the prime minister directed all the ministries to share details in next cabinet meeting so that action could be taken on the issue.

Senator Shibli Faraz said the cabinet also approved the names of the members of National Commission on the Status of Women, including Shaista Bukhari from Punjab, Habiba Hassan from Sindh, Rubina Naz Advocate from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Fatima Iqbal from Balochistan, Madhiha Sultana from AJK, Sosan Aziz from Gilgit Baltistan and Asia Azeem from the Federal Capital.

The minister said the PM directed steps for provision of energy to the consumers at affordable rates and reduction of the circular debt. He also directed the minister for energy to complete the process of reformation in various departments of the ministry with a time line.

He said Minister for Planning and Development Asad Umar gave a briefing on the steps being taken to control the coronavirus in the country and presented the report on the situation after relaxation in the lockdown.

Imran Khan remarked that activities in the construction and other sectors had even been allowed by the developed countries keeping in view the ground realities. Keeping the economy afloat and balancing security measures was imperative, he added.

Shibli Faraz it was observed that generally the people did not adopt precautionary measures and the cabinet appealed to them to strictly follow the standard operating procedures (SOPs) as the country could not afford a surge in the coronavirus cases.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/13/596489/country-on-the-brink-of-a-wheat-crisis-pbif-chief/>

PPA OPPOSES PUNJAB GOVT'S BID TO CONTROL POULTRY PRICES

By RECORDER REPORT on May 13, 2020

Pakistan Poultry Association (Northern Region) has urged the Punjab government to allow the free-market mechanism to regulate demand and supply instead of intervening in market prices.

PPA (Northern Region) Vice Chairman Chaudhry Muhammad Fargham while talking to media persons here on Tuesday said the industry was very hurt and depressed by the Punjab government's action of controlling the prices of live chicken and meat. He claimed that the commissioner animal husbandry in the ministry of national food security had submitted cost

of production to the Chief Justice of Peshawar High Court as far back as in March 2012 at Rs 31.27 for day old chicks and Rs 132.50/kg for broilers. The current costs are around Rs 45 for day old chick and Rs 160 for broilers. As per calculation of Director PRI Rawalpindi, the cost of production is Rs.145 per kg live.

The association kept the government fully abreast of the situation through different means and said it would lead to an acute shortage of poultry products as the losses would result in a reduction in production and that prices will shoot up. "We had advised the government that in the event of an increase in price, supply would partially but gradually increase to some extent. We had strongly advised the government not to intervene in free-market mechanism but the governments paid no heed," he added.

He said now the market is allowing surviving farmers to recover their losses, the administration is arresting the sellers of chicken meat and forcing them to sell meat at Rs 260/Kg. Such actions would lead to long term closure of poultry farms, which would lead to not only a tremendous increase in chicken meat prices but also mutton, beef and pulses as well, he warned.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/13/596558/govt-committed-to-fulfill-commitments-under-27th-intl-conventions-tweets-pm/>

LOCUST ATTACKS COULD INCREASE TEN TIMES THIS YEAR, FEARS MINISTER

By RECORDER REPORT on May 13, 2020

Sindh Minister for Agriculture Mohammed Ismail Rahu has said that according to the agriculture experts of the world the swarms of locust attacks could be increased ten times more than those of the last year. He informed that the season of two main crops of cotton and rice was about to start as well as monsoon season was going to start soon which was also the breeding season for locusts as well therefore three months of June, July and August were important in this regard.

This he said while presiding over a meeting about preventive measures for Locust attacks at Agriculture Extension Office, Shahbaz Building, Hyderabad on Tuesday.

The minister further said that swarms of locusts were attacking in Sindh like last year and this danger could not be avoided. He directed the officers concerned for stopping the breeding of locusts in deserted areas of Sindh which according to him could be effective. He said that all resources would be utilized for the elimination of locusts. He asked the officers concerned to take this task as challenge and utilize their expertise and experience to eliminate locusts and save standing crops. He underlined the need for focusing Mirpurkhas, Sukkur and Shaheed Benazirabad divisions situated near to Thar Desert which was the breeding area of locusts.

He said that Sindh Agriculture Department had remained busy for elimination of locusts for one year. Rahu also directed the officers concerned to resolve the problems of growers.

Director General Agriculture Hidayatullah Chajro briefed the meeting about preventive measures for locusts.

The participants of the meeting also gave suggestions for the prevention of locusts. Director Agriculture Shaukat Hussain Mastoi informed the meeting about the present situation of Subzi Mandi and other related issues.

Later Talking to media men, the minister said that the locusts had been present in Sindh for one year and couple of days earlier locusts attacked on crops in different parts of Hyderabad Division. He said that the Sindh government was continuously trying hard to prevent locusts. He informed that the different agriculture institutes of the world issued warning of locusts attacks in our region. He said that after Coronavirus the locusts were the biggest problem for Pakistan, the situation would be worsened in coming days, as locusts from Iran and India could attack in our country, he added. He informed that 57 teams were working for preventing locust attacks and now 41 more teams had been added for this purpose. He said that we were trying to make teams ready at taluka level to spray at any time and added that a helpline number had also been given to growers to inform about locusts' attack. Replying a question, he said that there was no conflict of Sindh with the federal government, we just demanded to federal Plant Protection Department for aerial spray.

He said that losses to crops were being estimated and soon details would be issued.

To a question, he said that due to Covid-19 the problems were being faced on wheat procurement but the Sindh government would achieve its target of wheat procurement. Replying another question, he said that due to Coronavirus, the export of mangoes would be affected.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/13/596455/locust-attacks-could-increase-ten-times-this-year-fears-minister/>

72 PERCENT OF WHEAT PROCUREMENT TARGET COMPLETED, CLAIMS MINISTER

By RECORDER REPORT on May 13, 2020

Punjab has achieved 72 percent of the 4.5 million tons of wheat procurement target set for the current year while 92 percent of 'baardana' (gunny bags) have been distributed among the farmers.

Food Minister Abdul Aleem Khan said this while replying to the questions of food department during the current session of Punjab Assembly. He said a coordinated policy has been implemented for the procurement of wheat in Punjab which has tried to bring direct benefits to common farmers. He also said that the government has ensured uninterrupted supply of "baardana" to the farmers all over the province. He said he himself is keeping an eye on wheat procurement drive and making on the spot checking of all the procedure and claimed no complaint has been received in this regard.

The Minister said that Punjab has set a target of purchasing 4.5 million metric tonnes of wheat which will be completed ahead of time. He said the Punjab government would also meet the wheat requirement of KPK by purchasing additional wheat while another 5 lakh metric tonnes is also under consideration for an extraordinary situation.

Aleem Khan assured that people of Punjab will not be facing the shortage of food grains. He claimed that the food department is fulfilling its responsibilities and all necessary steps are being taken to meet the requirements. He also answered various supplementary questions of the food department and informed the session about the steps taken by it for the betterment of this sector.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/13/596449/seven-2-percent-of-wheat-procurement-target-completed-claims-minister/>

90% BAGS FOR COLLECTING WHEAT DISTRIBUTED

By Our Correspondent Published: May 13, 2020

LAHORE: Provincial Senior Minister Abdul Aleem Khan has said that a coordinated policy has been implemented for the procurement of wheat in Punjab while trying to bring direct benefits to the farmers.

Replying to lawmakers' questions about the Food Department in the Punjab Assembly, he added that 72 per cent target of the procurement of wheat has been achieved in Punjab, while the distribution of 92 per cent bags to farmers has been completed for the purpose so far.

The minister said the Punjab government has ensured uninterrupted supply of sacks to the farmers all over the province this year. He told the house that he had inspected the wheat procurement drive and found no complaint on the ground.

He said Punjab has set a target of purchasing 4.5 million tonnes of wheat, which will hopefully be completed ahead of time. He said the Punjab government would also meet the wheat requirement of K-P besides. He said the additional purchase of 500,000 tonnes is also under consideration to meet an extraordinary situation.

The minister said illegal transportation of wheat in Punjab has been strictly curtailed and largescale operations have been carried out against hoarders without any discrimination.

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<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2220247/1-90-bags-collecting-wheat-distributed/>

FLOUR CRISIS FEARED AS PRICE GOES UP

Ali Hazrat Bacha May 14, 2020

PESHAWAR: The price of a 20kg wheat flour bag went up by Rs30 here on Wednesday as the local millers stopped supplies to hundreds of points selling flour in different parts of the provincial capital at subsidised rate.

Flour dealers of the main Rampura Market told Dawn that 20kg bag of mixed quality flour was sold for Rs920-Rs930 in the wholesale level against the previous rate of Rs870-Rs880 and the 20kg fine atta bag at Rs1,000.

The Bara Road wholesalers and retailers were found to have fixed the price at will.

According to the dealers, sales points were set up in different localities to provide flour to people at the controlled price of Rs808 per bag but they're closed at the moment.

They said wheat supply from Punjab had been suspended to the mills of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa leading to the closure of sales points.

Millers insist situation caused by halt to wheat supply from Punjab

The dealers said the flour price had increased in Punjab, where millers continuously demanded increase in wheat quota at the subsidised rate but the government didn't do so.

They added that the dealers of KP, too, had to purchase wheat at high price.

Meanwhile, the Pakistan Flour Mills Association, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, has warned a halt to the grinding of wheat over the suspension of supplies at subsidised rate from the provincial government.

It also feared a severe flour crisis in the province after Eidul Fitr.

“All of our 180 flour mills are to stop the grinding within a couple of days due to ban on wheat supply from Punjab KP flour mills,” association president Haji Mohammad Iqbal told Dawn.

He demanded the lifting of the ban on wheat supply from Punjab to KP to control flour price hike.

Meanwhile, the millers led by Mohammad Naeem Butt and office-bearers of the Sarhad Chamber of Commerce and Industry also held a meeting at the chamber’s offices with SCCI president Engineer Maqsood Anwar Pervaiz in the chair.

They demanded of Chief Minister Mahmood Khan to intervene and ensure the restoration of wheat supply from Punjab to KP.

The millers said the government of Punjab had imposed an ‘unconstitutional’ and ‘unlawful’ ban on wheat transportation to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and that ban was a clear violation of Article 151 of the Constitution.

“Our province is deficient in wheat, so it mostly depends on Punjab to fulfil its needs,” a miller said.

He said wheat supply to local mills from the government’s godowns had come to a halt and that all mills would be closed under the prevailing circumstances as there was no other option to acquire wheat.

The millers said due to the unavailability of wheat on the market, they were unable to continue supplying flour to the markets at the subsidised price, which had led to the fear of flour shortage across the province.

“We had earlier warned the government to take up the wheat ban issue with Sindh, Punjab and federal governments but they paid no attention,” Mr Naeem Butt said.

He added that the entire responsibility rested with the provincial government.

The miller alleged that the current performance of the provincial government, especially food department, in the prevailing circumstances was very disappointing.

Mr Maqsood Pervaiz asked the government to lift the ‘inter-provincial’ ban on wheat supply from Punjab to KP to ensure the timely availability of wheat to local mills and fulfil the requirement of food commodity and avert any flour crisis in the province.

He said the economic and business activities had slowed down due to the prolonged coronavirus-induced lockdown, while the imposition of ban on the transportation of wheat and unavailability of wheat for local mills would lead to the closure of flour industry in the province.

The SCCI chief said the unavailability of wheat for KP flour mills was completely unjust and unbearable and that the ban on wheat transportation should be lifted immediately.

He urged Prime Minister Imran Khan, federal food minister and secretary and other authorities to take an immediate notice of the ‘unconstitutional’ and ‘unlawful’ inter-provincial restrictions on wheat supply and ensure the smooth availability of wheat of KP flour mills.

When contacted, food secretary Nisar Ahmad said the province had a stock of over 35,000 metric tons of wheat in its godowns but that was meant for emergency situation only.

“We regularly provide wheat quota to local mills but now Punjab has stopped supplies due to own requirements, so millers have to arrange wheat privately by themselves,” he said.

The official said the province’s mills had to depend 80 per cent on wheat from Punjab.

“KP markets have flour in sufficient quantity but wheat supply has been stopped by Punjab due to local procurement process,” he said.

The secretary said wheat harvesting had begun in KP, so millers should acquire it to operate mills until the regular supply was made from official godowns.

He said the relevant authorities were well aware of the situation.

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ECC OKAYS RS50BN FOR AGRICULTURE SECTOR

Khaleeq Kiani Updated May 14, 2020

ISLAMABAD: The government on Wednesday approved a Rs50 billion package for the agriculture sector and about Rs17bn additional funds to defence forces to foot extra fuel bills.

The decisions were taken at a meeting of the Economic Coordination Committee (ECC) of the Cabinet, presided over by Finance Adviser Dr Abdul Hafeez Shaikh, that also approved in principle a cell phone assembling policy.

The ECC was given a demand of Rs56.6bn agriculture package to provide the farmers subsidy on fertilisers, reduction in bank mark-up on agriculture loans, subsidy on cotton seed and white fly pesticides and sales tax subsidy on locally manufactured tractors as part Rs100bn earmarked for farmers and small and medium enterprises (SME) out of the Rs1,200bn coronavirus relief package.

However, Shaikh asked the food security ministry to rationalise it to Rs50bn as per its share in the overall Rs100 package announced for the SMEs and the agriculture sector.

He said the ECC had already approved a Rs50bn package for the former to provide indirect cash flow support to nearly 3.5 million people through pre-paid electricity.

Rs17bn set aside for defence forces’ fuel bill

Under the agriculture package, about Rs37bn subsidy would be offered to farmers on the purchase of fertilisers. The amount would include a subsidy of Rs925 per bag on DAP and other phosphatic fertilisers and Rs243 per bag on urea and other nitrogen fertilisers.

The ECC was told that the estimated urea offtake would be around 3.04m tonnes while DAP was estimated at 0.95m tonnes for the Kharif season. The subsidy scheme will be implemented by the provinces and the amount will be disbursed through a scratch card scheme already in place in Punjab.

It was also informed that the fertiliser share in the cost of production for major crops was around 10-15 per cent and the provision of subsidy would increase their affordability to adopt the recommended level of fertiliser nutrient use and best agricultural management practices.

Similarly, under the agriculture package, a reduction in mark-up of agri loans at the total cost of Rs8.8bn, subsidy on cotton seed worth Rs2.3bn and white fly pesticides at Rs6bn were also approved.

Furthermore, the ECC called for inclusion of other banks along with Zarai Taraqati in the scheme to enhance outreach of farmers with focus on subsistence farmers with a land holding of 12.5 acres. It was suggested that since markup had been reduced by the State Bank of Pakistan, the interest rates used in the proposal could also be rationalised accordingly.

The ECC called for the implementation mechanism, especially through the scratch card system, to be monitored carefully to ensure that the actual beneficiaries of the package were genuine farmers.

It was also pointed out that since with the provision of subsidy on fertilisers, their demand might increase, the same had to be communicated to the Ministry of Industries and Production (MoIP) in time to make arrangements accordingly.

The meeting approved a proposal by the Poverty Alleviation & Social Safety Division for disbursement of the Special Relief Package for the population living along the Line of Control in a single installment of Rs12,000 for six months from January-June while from July onwards, those families will be given monthly installments of Rs2,000 each until end of December.

The ECC took up different proposals for technical supplementary grants by various divisions and approved one by the Defence Division for a supplementary grant of Rs16.6bn to meet the expenses on POL, utilities and medical stores of the Defence Services.

In addition, it okayed Rs288m for payment of salaries to the employees of Pakistan Machine Tool Factory for the period from October 2019 to June 2020 and Rs40 million to the law ministry for employee-related costs and operating expenditures of the Federal Judicial Academy.

The ECC also discussed the Mobile Device Manufacturing Policy as proposed by the MoIP with the objectives of technology acquisition and localisation of mobile devices through domestic investment, joint ventures, FDI, creation of 200,000 direct and indirect jobs, price reduction for consumers, increase in digitisation through supporting 4G/5G technologies, development of efficient manufacturing ecosystem, exports of competitively manufactured handsets and achievement of security objectives.

It deliberated upon various components of the policy and approved in-principle with instructions to the MoIP to further fine-tune its various features and incentives for promoting localisation and research and development leading to export of mobile phones.

Lastly, the ECC gave green signal to the release of 35,000 tonnes of wheat from the Pakistan Agriculture Storage and Services Corporation to the Azad Jammu and Kashmir government at Rs1.52bn, including the cost of wheat and incidental charges, to be paid 50pc by the federal administration from the stimulus package announced to fight against Covid-19.

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DIESEL SHORTAGE, POL PRICES CUT MAY HAMPER WHEAT HARVESTING

Amjad Mahmood May 11, 2020

LAHORE: There seems to be no let-up in the miseries of the farmers as the authorities remain apathetic to the diesel shortage being faced by them in the middle of the wheat harvesting season.

Reports of unavailability of diesel in the market had started doing rounds a couple of days after downward revision of the rates of petroleum products on April 30 in line with the sharp decline in their prices in the world market.

Almost all oil marketing companies stopped placing orders with the international suppliers as soon as the Oil and Gas Regulatory Authority (Ogra) hinted at proposing a cut in oil prices.

Already suffering because of shortage of labour due to Covid-19 lockdown, wheat growers are facing another unexpected crisis amid the harvesting season in the form of unavailability of diesel to run their tractors and threshing machines. This may lead to delay in harvesting.

Farmers riding their tractor-trolleys and pick-ups carrying barrels and jerry cans can be seen queuing up at the filling stations to get diesel, particularly in Bhakkar, Layyah and Mianwali districts of Punjab. In most cases, they return empty-handed or get a few litres of diesel.

“At a time when I should have been in my lands to oversee wheat harvesting, I’m forced to line up at petrol pumps to get diesel for my tractor-run thresher,” laments Rana Haider, a farmer from Thal area in Bhakkar.

Talking to Dawn by phone, he says that he has lost his three precious days in search of diesel but failed to find the product and he is paying rent for the threshing machine without using it.

Saeed Baloch, a petrol pump owner in Mianwali, claims the oil marketing companies have introduced quota regimes since April 30 for the first time on the basis of average calculated on the yearly basis and thus are providing them one-fourth of the supplies against the demand.

The companies are also delaying the supplies contrary to their normal routines, he alleges, explaining that he would get oil supply the next day of placing the order. But, since the recent cut in prices, this gap between placement of order and supplies has widened to the minimum four days, creating a severe shortage particularly of diesel, he adds.

He wonders why the government didn’t manage the situation while the state-run Pakistan State Oil had flagged the issued in the first week of May.

An official of the PSO Lahore region alleges that the private oil marketing companies (OMCs) are not supplying petroleum products to their respective dealers and thus the whole pressure has been diverted to the PSO outlets. He says that his entity is supplying one million litres of diesel daily only in Lahore region to meet the wheat harvesting-related demand.

A petroleum dealer, Rehmat Khan Wardag, says OMCs have not placed orders for the import of petroleum products since the recent cut in oil prices. He says the OMCs suffered billions of rupees losses in the process and fears that the volatile situation in the world markets will keep them away from the business in coming weeks, which may lead to severe shortage of oil, particularly diesel, in the local market.

He has urged the government to import oil on its own without delay to fend off the hovering shortage that may plunge the sectors dependent on diesel, particularly the agriculture sector, into a severe crisis.

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FOOD OFFICIAL MANHANDLED BY TOWN COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN FOR INTERCEPTING WHEAT STOCK

Dawn Report May 11, 2020

UMERKOT: Harassment and manhandling of a food department official by Samaro town committee chairman late on Saturday evening sent a wave of anger among food officials across the town. An emergency meeting of senior food officials was held on Sunday to condemn the incident.

It was gathered that food inspector Iftikhar Arain, along with a police team, intercepted a consignment of 1,200 wheat bags of 40-kg each while it was being transported by two trucks to some other district. The action was taken as part of the ongoing campaign against hoarding/illegal movement of wheat stocks which was causing an artificial shortage of the commodity and wheat flour in the province.

According to Mr Arain, when he impounded one truck-load of wheat and chased the other truck, Samaro town committee chairman, Rafique Ahmed Qaimkhani, who belonged to the ruling Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), along with some other persons intervened and harassed him to deter him from discharging his official duty. "Qaimkhani abused and held me hostage for some time and then slapped me when I did not agree to come to his terms," alleged Mr Arain.

He said he intended to recover more than 14,000 other wheat bags hoarded in his area of operation to prevent the stocks from being shifted to some other district/province in violation of the relevant ban imposed by the provincial government.

Escorted by a police force, the officials recovered more than 1,00,000 wheat bags and sealed off the mills.

Reacting angrily to the incident, senior food officials held a meeting under the chairmanship of Mohammed Hussain Mahar to discuss the issue. Ghulam Nabi Soomro, Iftikhar Arain and other senior officials including heads of all procurement centres in the district attended the meeting.

The meeting condemned the town committee chairman's act of hooliganism as unacceptable. It said Qaimkhani's attempt of obstructing the food official from performing his duty was unlawful. Appropriate action must be taken against him and those who accompanied him in this unlawful act, it added.

The meeting participants said no one was above the law and, as such, could not be allowed to stop any official from performing duty in line with the orders issued by government.

They resolved to stop performing their official duties pertaining to wheat procurement if action was not taken against the offenders.

SUKKUR: Raids were conducted in three flour mills in the Salehpat town as the drive against hoarders of wheat continued in Sukkur district, food officials said on Saturday.

In Jacobabad, district food controller Asghar Soomro along with Assistant Commissioner of Garhi Khero Sanaullah Bhatti carried out a raid on a rice mill in Dao Jahanpur on the orders of Deputy Commissioner Ghazanfar Ali Qadri.

NAUSHAHRO FERORE: District food controller Qareebullah Soomro said on Saturday that around 145,500 wheat bags were recovered in raids on several godowns in grain markets of Bhiriya Road, Kandiaro, Mehrabpur and Khan Wahan towns.

The raiding team found more than 20,000 wheat bags clandestinely stocked there. The stocks were seized and the rice mill was sealed, the officials said.

He told local reporters around 40,000 wheat bags were recovered in Khan Wahan, 35,000 in Mehrabpur, 11,500 in Kandiaro and 60,000 in Bhiriya Road.

All the godowns were sealed, he added.

Published in Dawn, May 11th, 2020

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556097/food-official-manhandled-by-town-committee-chairman-for-intercepting-wheat-stock>

SUKKUR NAB READIES FOUR REFERENCES ON WHEAT SCAM

The Newspaper's Correspondent May 11, 2020

SUKKUR: The Sukkur region of the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) has prepared four references concerning misappropriation of billions of rupees worth of wheat in food department and is ready to file them in accountability court, according to sources.

Sources in the NAB said the references would be filed after seeking formal approval of the bureau's chairman. In this connection, a meeting of NAB's regional board presided over by its Sukkur director general reviewed the scam in Sukkur, Larkana and Shaheed Benazirabad divisions and accorded approval to the references prepared against the corrupt officials of food department.

The sources said the NAB chairman himself had issued directives to file the references over growing complaints about large-scale corruption in food department in different districts of the province.

The sources said that a reference accused deputy director food Anees-ur-Rehman Mahar, district food controller Mohammad Iqbal Memon and others of Rs128 million corruption and another reference blamed Khairpur district food controller Mohammad Ali Ujjan and others of more than Rs58m graft in the stored grain.

The third reference accused Larkana district food controller Zahid Ali Unnar and others of Rs870m corruption and the fourth blamed Kandhkot-Kashmore's deputy director of food Fazal Mohammad Bhangwar and others of more than Rs74m graft.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556096/sukkur-nab-readies-four-references-on-wheat-scam>

IT'S A SEASON OF MANGOES AND COVID-19

Mohammad Hussain Khan May 11, 2020

THE season of the king of fruits — mangoes — has started. But this year, it starts amidst serious concerns of coronavirus spreading in Sindh's rural areas since thousands of labourers arrive from South Punjab, mainly Muzaffargarh. Under the current circumstances, allowing them to enter Sindh is risky since this may allow the contagion to spread in rural areas which, by and large, have remained safe compared with urban areas.

To harvest mangoes, big orchard owners let out their farms to contractors. Punjab's labourers – hired by the orchard contractors – have begun to arrive in Sindh's mango farms, which are larger, through different means of transport, while consignments from these farms have started reaching Punjab.

Till May 7, the Sindh government was debating standard operating procedures (SOPs) to let these workers enter the province. Draft SOPs have been presented to the Sindh government by Sharjeel Inam Memon, an orchard owner who is a Sindh Assembly member from Hyderabad's rural area. He had raised this issue of Punjab's labourers with the government as they turned up in thousands.

“I have discussed SOPs with the Sindh chief minister and he has not yet finalised them. We are trying to see the situation is handled adroitly,” says Mr Memon, an influential member of Sindh's ruling party.

Among other measures, the 11-point draft recommends that growers/contractors provide a list of workers from other provinces. It also states enrollment forms will have to be filled and submitted before revenue officials within five working days of labourers commencing work. Items such as gloves, masks and hand sanitisers have to be provided to those working along the entire mango value chain.

Every grower has to try to engage the maximum number of local labourers and minimise hiring from elsewhere for plucking and packing purposes. If a worker develops Covid-19 symptoms, he has to be sent for a checkup. A proforma has to be filled by each worker for tracking and tracing purposes.

‘There is no rocket science involved which would prevent local labour from learning to pluck or pack mangoes. Previously, nobody thought of departing from the conventional practice of labour coming in from Punjab to Sindh because there was no reason for it’

The Sindh government is continuously resisting pressure from the PTI-led federal government, as well as the business community, to ease the lockdown. The chief minister had even differed, rightly so, with the 20-point SOPs mutually agreed between the ulema and President Arif Alvi on Taraweeh prayers in Ramazan to stem the spread of the contagion. He feared the SOPs will not be implementable therefore sought to restrict prayer congregations.

Currently, Sindh health officials dealing with the Covid-19 situation and pandemic trajectory believe May is going to be tough from the point of view of a spike in the number of cases. “We are bracing for an exponential rise in cases if the lockdown is eased,” observes a Sindh health official associated with monitoring the Covid-19 situation. “The impact of the decision taken for opening up of businesses will be seen after a fortnight,” he asserted.

Labourers have already started to arrive unchecked in Sindh from Punjab where an upward trend in the number of cases can be seen, and more are on their way. It is a foregone conclusion that the SOPs specific to mango workers will not be doable, any more than those that were drafted for prayer congregations.

“I think this is an opportunity that can bring local labourers forward and help overcome unemployment currently seen in the pandemic’s backdrop,” says Sindh agriculture minister Ismail Rahu, who is the son of hari leader Fazil Rahu. The real issue, he opines, pertains to big farms that are let out to contractors who hire workers from Punjab. “One expert worker brought from Punjab for each farm should be enough, the rest should be purely local labourers to handle the mango crop this season. This is how they will get trained as well,” he remarks.

The issue of workers from Punjab coming to Sindh has surfaced for the first time because of the pandemic, otherwise, it was conventional practice for orchard owners and contractors. Locally known as bharawa and thukawa, labour from Punjab has picked, sorted and packed mangoes with dexterity for years.

The contractors’ argument is since available local labour is not trained, engaging them would cause mango wastage and result in monetary losses. Therefore, this issue is more of contractors than of orchard owners.

Labour from Punjab arrives in groups of 40-50 people. Depending on the size of an orchard, multiple teams work together, switching from one farm to another if need be. They stay at farms and leave once the season is finished, awaiting the arrival of kinnow season in Punjab.

“There is no rocket science involved which would prevent local labour from learning to pluck or pack mangoes. Nobody thought of departing from conventional practice before because there was no reason for it,” remarks Sindh Abadgar Board vice president Mahmood Nawaz Shah, who is also an owner of mango orchards and an exporter. To quote a medium-sized mango grower Nadeem Shah, Punjab’s labour is cheap as well as trained.

The Sindh government remained worried till all the men from Tableeghi Jamaat – who became virus carriers in the province in March – recovered and were repatriated home. The government’s efforts to ensure safe transportation was praised. Given its lockdown policy, it is unlikely that the Murad Shah-led government will have two different standards relating to the same emergency.

While things are challenging this year, it is an opportunity to engage local labour so that they get trained and there is less reliance on workers from another province next season. It would not be difficult for the locals to learn the art of sorting and plucking since they work in the fields all year round. Is saving mangoes more important than saving lives?

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556252/its-a-season-of-mangoes-and-covid-19>

AGRICULTURAL HARDSHIP UNDER LOCKDOWN

Amjad Mahmood Updated May 11, 2020

THE agriculture sector is facing one of its biggest crises. On one hand, erratic weather and the resultant untimely heavy rains and hailstorms, coupled with the locust attack, are making it hard for farmers to sleep at night. On the other hand, the lockdown since mid-March has created many challenges and negatively impacted the rural population in general and small farm holders in particular.

The prolonged shutdown across the country has not only reduced on-farms activities but also disturbed the transport and sale of crops, vegetables and fruits, as well as the purchase of farm inputs.

Livestock, the most important sub-sector which contributes around 60 per cent of agriculture’s share to GDP, is the major victim of the Covid-19 outbreak. To meet their day-to-day expenses, small farmers rear milch cattle and sell the milk.

Closure of tea-stalls, sweets shops and the reduced timing for milk shops under the lockdown's standard operating procedures (SOPs) shrank demand for this highly perishable commodity and thus cut its rates.

Salahuddin, a smallholder farmer from Narang Mandi town near Lahore, says he gets 72 litres of milk from his nine buffaloes. Before the lockdown, the milkman would give him Rs80 per litre but now is not willing to buy at even Rs50 per litre citing hurdles in the onward sale because of virus issues. Likewise, owner of a known sweet shop in Mian Channu (Khanewal) has his own dairy farm but since he is disallowed to open his business because of the lockdown, he is forced to sell milk at Rs40 per litre in the town, says Pakistan Kissan Ittehad general secretary Mian Umair, who belongs to the area.

Some dairy farmers are turning towards value addition in the form of mozzarella cheese and ghee to prolong milk's shelf life rather than sell it at throwaway prices

Initially suffering at the hands of the milkman, Mr Salahuddin is now trying to find a solution through value addition: he is preparing (mozzarella quality) cheese and trying to sell it online. Even if he doesn't manage to find buyers, this will enhance the shelf life of the milk. Similarly, some dairy farmers are making desi ghee out of milk instead of selling the commodity at throwaway prices.

Closure of hotels and the ban on weddings and parties is also hurting the once thriving poultry sector. Vegetables are also being sold at low rates in the wholesale market though end consumers are not benefitting from the low prices as the middlemen are making a killer profit.

"The first month of the lockdown was particularly difficult for farmers as delinked from the markets, they had to sell their dairy and farm products at throwaway prices," says Farooq Tariq, general secretary of Pakistan Kissan Rabita Committee, a representative of smallholder farmers. "Those engaged in producing horticulture, floriculture and dairy farming were shattered with the losses for being forced to market their commodities at whatever rate offered in the local bazaar."

Hanf Hanjra, a horticulturist from Sargodha, says previously he earned a good living during the wedding and Ramazan seasons by dispatching his produce to big markets like Lahore and Gujranwala. "However, this time I'm hardly able to meet my expenses because I'm forced to sell my farm produce in the local market at much lower rates as either transport to far-off markets is not available or its charges are unaffordable." He claims he could not once cover transport charges even for the Sargodha market where his four maunds (around 160kg) of coriander was sold for just Rs70 in wholesale.

Unfortunately, the harvesting season of wheat, politically the most important crop, has also fallen in this time of social distancing. The already scarce manual labour has been further reduced because of mobility issues in the wake of the pandemic. And this gap in demand and supply has pushed up wages of available farmworkers.

"Labour is costlier this year as workers face problems crossing police check-posts erected to curtail the movement of people," says Mian Umair. Previously, he would pay 160kg per acre of wheat to a worker for reaping his crop and now this rate has gone up to 210kg per acre. Facing issues trying to convince the mostly illiterate labour force to observe social distancing rules, he says he had to hire manpower from as far as Kasur district, more than 200km away from Mian Channu.

The farming sector was also hit because of difficulties in obtaining inputs and the shutdown of agriculture-engineering and allied industries. Though the government has permitted auto workshops to function when the wheat harvesting season sets in, the decision to allow shops of lath machines, spare parts, etc came a bit late in the day and farmers could not get their tractors, tube-wells and allied machines repaired in time. There were also difficulties in procuring medicine for cattle, bemoans Mr Salah.

Mr Tariq regrets that small farmers, one of the hardest-hit class by the lockdown, are not being considered for compensation by the government. He fears that this will lead to the compounding of rural poverty, disabling particularly the landless farmers from the purchase of seed and other farm inputs for the next crop.

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QCCI BACKS FLOUR MILLERS' DEMAND

CORRESPONDENT May 11, 2020

QUETTA. Quetta Chamber of Commerce and Industry backed Pakistan Flour Mills Association's demand of lifting inter-district ban on the transportation of wheat in the name of coronavirus lockdown. "Section 144 is imposed across Balochistan to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

However, the ban on inter-district transportation on wheat could cause food shortage in the province," said QCCI Senior Vice President Badaruddin Kakar in a statement issued on Saturday. Kakar accused the provincial government and food department of deliberately causing wheat turmoil in Balochistan to ruin the provincial flour mill industry.

"Naseerabad, Jhal Magsi and Jaffar districts fulfill wheat requirements of other districts of the province. Despite the fact, Balochistan government making any policy and strategy," said the QCCI senior vice president in the statement.

He alleged the provincial government for attempting to create wheat shortage to increase flour prices across the province. Criticising wheat procurement policy of the government, Kakar said, "Balochistan produces 80 to 90 million sacks of wheat in a year but the government announced to procure only one million sacks which will ruin the flour mills business in the province.

https://epaper.tribune.com.pk/DisplayDetails.aspx?ENI_ID=11202005110209&EN_ID=11202005110063&EMID=11202005110030

PAKISTAN'S SUGAR POLICY NEEDS REFORMS

By HARI LOHANO Published: May 11, 2020

KARACHI: In the midst of the coronavirus crisis, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government has released the probe commission report on the misuse of sugar and wheat subsidies in the country.

The report shows the power and influence of sugar barons in relation to the country's policy-making. Most of the names mentioned in the report are close associates of the PM, the PTI and the ministers in the government.

PM Imran deserves much credit for the release of the report. He has promised to take decisive action after the probe commission submits its final recommendations.

Findings of the report raise crucial questions about the government's sugar policy and the transparency of its economic policy. How does the sugar policy work? How sugar subsidy benefits only the sugar industry?

Sugarcane is a high-value, rich farmer's crop due its special characteristics. Its per-acre expenses are much higher than any other cash crop.

The time from planting to harvesting is longer. Its marketing chain, from buying seed to arranging tractor trollies for transporting it to sugar mills, negotiating price and finally getting payment, involves very lengthy processes. This favours the rich and better-off farmers as against the cash-starved small landowners.

Pakistan is among the top 10 sugarcane producing countries in the world, with plantations over a million hectares. Sugarcane production accounts for nearly two-thirds of the area in Punjab and a quarter in Sindh.

It uses more of the subsidised agricultural inputs, especially fertiliser and water, than any other crop in the economy. In a highly water-stressed country like Pakistan, sugarcane uses a much higher quantity of water than any other crop.

Between 2013-14 and 2017-18, according to the Economic Survey of Pakistan, the production of sugarcane increased by an impressive 24%, from 67 to 83 million tonnes.

During this period, the area where sugarcane was cultivated increased by 14% from 1.17 to 1.34 million hectares. The average yield per hectare, rising from 57 to 62 tonnes, shows an increase of only 8%.

The area under sugarcane cultivation in Pakistan is the fifth largest in the world after Brazil, India, China and Thailand. Its per-hectare yield, however, is much lower than the other major producers.

Its yield of 62 tonnes per hectare in 2018 was well below the world average of 73 tonnes and even below India's yield of 80 tonnes.

Figures for last year's crop (2018-19), compared with the average performance of crops in the previous five years, showed a decline of 9% in sugarcane cultivation and 6% in production. This decline is mainly attributed to late payments to farmers, shortage of water and an uncertain political environment during the 2018 election.

As in production, Pakistan is among the top 10 countries in consumption of sugar in the world and the biggest consumer of sugar in South Asia. Consumption of sugar is over 25 kg per person per year in Pakistan. In India, it is 20 kg and in China 11 kg.

Pakistan has 89 sugar mills, a much higher number than needed for domestic requirement. Some of these are located in regions where they are economically unviable and environmentally unsuitable.

Most of these mills are owned by very influential and powerful families. They belong to the governing party, the main opposition parties and the families of former generals.

At the time of Independence in 1947, there were only two sugar mills in the country. Until 1970, there were only four.

The mushroom growth of the mills was mainly during General Zia's period of office (1977-1988), when state patronage was provided to create a new business and political class to counter political opposition to his dictatorial rule. Since then, all the major political parties have followed this path and expanded it.

This growth of the sugar industry has had a very adverse effect on the country's other climatically suitable cash crop, cotton, which has been the backbone of the agriculture sector and a major source of foreign currency reserves for the country.

Between 2013-14 and 2017-18, the area under cotton cultivation declined by 4% and its production by 6%. More strikingly, when 2018-19 is compared with the average performance of the crop in the previous five years, its cultivation area has declined by 17% and production fell by two million bales or 20%.

The pricing policy for sugarcane and sugar is based on government intervention in the market through huge public subsidies, direct and indirect, at various levels of production and sale of the commodity.

At the time of harvesting the crop, the government announces a guaranteed minimum price for sugarcane, to encourage farmers to increase the area under cultivation. The government even decides about the movement of the crop – to ensure that sugar mill owners receive plenty of the produce to keep their business viable.

To protect the sugar industry further, the government imposes higher tariffs on sugar imports to “stabilise” prices in the domestic market. In general, the domestic price for sugar remains much higher than the average world price.

In addition, the government provides an export subsidy on sugar in the name of increasing foreign currency reserves.

The government’s decision in September 2018 to allow export of sugar, despite early indications of low production in the country, was a continuation of past public policy to protect the industry.

Pakistan exported 0.4 million tonnes of sugar in 2016-17 and 1.6 million tonnes in 2017-18. Moreover, in 2017, during the period of Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) government, the sugar export quota was increased from 0.5 to 2 million tonnes.

There are two prices for refined sugar in the domestic market. One is the ex-mill price, which is the wholesale price at which the mill sells its product to traders and shopkeepers. The other is the retail price of sugar sold to customers at local corner shops and supermarkets – the price paid by common consumers.

The decision to export the commodity caused a hike in both these prices. The ex-mill price increased from Rs52 to Rs54 per kg in January 2019. The retail price, however, increased from Rs56 to Rs59, a rise of 6%.

With the increasing exports, prices increased regularly for domestic consumers. Even after the ban on sugar exports in February, prices remain on the higher side.

Between December 2019 and March 2020, the ex-mill price for sugar increased by 39% to Rs72. In the same period, the retail price increased by 33% to Rs80.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)’s April 2020 report also mentions that wholesale prices for sugar in Pakistan were over 50% higher in March than the international prices.

The sugar industry has benefitted enormously from the government’s policy. In addition to the export subsidy of Rs3 billion by the Punjab government, the sugar mill owners have received extra profit to the extent of Rs85 billion – Rs5.7 billion per month from January 2019 to the end of March 2020.

The above discussion demonstrates that the government’s sugar policy distorts the local market. This harms poor the most and inflicts huge costs on the domestic economy. The only beneficiary is the influential and powerful sugar industry.

At the time of pandemic and huge risks to economy, the government should refrain from intervening in the sugar market and consider reforms in the industry through parliamentary procedures and democratic practices.

In this hour of economic crisis, the government should focus more on the protection of poor and welfare of society through the provision of public goods like healthcare and strengthen the social safety nets.

The writer is a PhD from the UK and writes for The Guardian as well

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2218472/2-pakistans-sugar-policy-needs-reforms/>

HAILSTORM DAMAGES WHEAT CROP, ORCHARDS IN BAJAUR

The Newspaper's Correspondent Updated May 12, 2020

KHAR: Rain coupled with hailstorm damaged standing wheat crop, vegetables and orchards in Mamond tehsil of Bajaur tribal district, residents and officials said on Monday.

They said that hailstorm accompanied by rain started just after Iftari and lasted for about one hour.

They said that Dabar, Badan, Shah Goo, Shahi Thangi, Mokha, Kalpanim Kaga, Sewai and other hilly areas were the worst affected.

Local residents told this correspondent that hailstones were very large in size, severely damaging the standing crop of wheat, vegetables and orchards in the region.

They said that the growers were expecting good harvest of wheat crop this year, but hailstones largely damaged it.

District agriculture officer Ziaul Islam Dawar told Dawn that the hailstorm caused extensive damage to wheat crop and vegetables in Mamond tehsil.

Published in Dawn, May 12th, 2020

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556473/hailstorm-damages-wheat-crop-orchards-in-bajaur>

33,000 TONS OF WHEAT RECOVERED DURING RAIDS: MINISTER

By RECORDER REPORT on May 12, 2020

The Punjab Food Department has so far recovered 33,130 tons of stored wheat by raiding 436 storage places in different districts of the province.

The recovered wheat has been seized and action is being taken against the accused under the law, said Senior Minister Punjab Abdul Aleem Khan here on Monday.

The minister said that strict action was being taken against wheat stockpiling across the province and crackdown was being carried out indiscriminately against the elements involved in this heinous crime.

In a briefing session of the food department, Aleem Khan said that for the last two weeks, strict checks were being carried out on the land and river routes of Punjab where smuggling of wheat had been curtailed with the help of the intelligence agencies and Rangers.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/12/596146/three-3000-tons-of-wheat-recovered-during-raids-minister/>

KHARIF SEASON PADDY TO BE SOWN OVER 4.618M ACRES IN PUNJAB

RECORDER REPORT May 12, 2020

SIALKOT: More than 4.618 million acres of land would be brought under paddy crop during Kharif season in various rice growing areas of the Punjab.

Sources in Agriculture department told Business Recorder on Monday that the department had chalked out a well-knitted training programme to create awareness among the growers about the use of recommended seed and proper use of fertilizer to attain the fixed target in Punjab.

In this regard, the department deputed special training teams which were visiting various villages for providing proper guidance and assistance about the use of inputs, nursery sowing and transfer of plants into fields to the rice growers in the Punjab.

In Sialkot district, paddy will be cultivated on 317030 acres of land in Sialkot, Daska, Pasrur and Sambrial tehsils during Kharif season. The paddy would be sown on 91083 acres in Sialkot, 78053 acres in Daska, 103098 acres in Pasrur and 44796 acres in Sambrial tehsils of Sialkot district. Local agriculture department had initiated farmers training programme in 1442 villages of Sialkot, Daska, Pasrur and Sambrial tehsils of Sialkot district. Special training teams were busy to empower rice growers for enhancing per acre yield, sowing of paddy nurseries, utilization of irrigation water, pesticides and fertilizer as well as about the different varieties of paddy in Sialkot district, the sources added.

Some progressive farmers were adopting modern technology for raising rice nursery by automatic machine in plastic trays at local agriculture farm and ready for transplanting by 'Rice Trans Planter' in Bajwat area of Sialkot.

<https://epaper.brecorder.com/2020/05/12/10-page/836745-news.html>

TRADING ACTIVITIES RESUME ON COTTON MARKET

By RECORDER REPORT on May 12, 2020

Trading activities resume on the cotton market on Monday after the closure of more than one and a half months due to the coronavirus lockdown.

Market sources said that traders are hopeful that situation will be improved gradually after the softening of the lockdown by the government.

Cotton analyst Naseem Usman told that both federal and provincial governments should take steps to save the cotton crop from the locust attack. The recent report of Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations warned of a potentially serious food security crisis this year in several regional countries, including Pakistan, due to locust attacks.

It is expected that Pakistan's Rabi and Kharif crops will be badly affected by locust attack. According to the estimates Pakistan's economy has to bear the loss of Rs 669 billion due to the locust attack during the current year.

Naseem Usman said that Spot Rate Committee of Karachi Cotton Association has stabled the spot rate at Rs 8600 per maund. The rate of cotton in Sindh and Punjab is in between Rs 7000 to Rs 8600 per maund. The rate of polyester fiber was decreased by Rs 3 per kg and was available at Rs 157 per kg.

<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/12/596129/trading-activities-resume-on-cotton-market/>

K-P CHALKS OUT STRATEGY TO BATTLE LOCUSTS

By Our Correspondent Published: May 12, 2020

PESHAWAR: After crops in multiple districts were ravaged by locusts, the provincial government on Monday said that it has prepared an inclusive strategy for tackling the pests.

Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (K-P) Minister for Agriculture and Livestock, Mohibullah Khan on Monday presided over a meeting to review the agriculture department's response to battling swarms of locusts.

Agriculture Secretary Israr Khan, Agriculture Extension Director-General Abid Kamal and other senior officials attended the meeting.

The provincial agriculture minister was briefed on the presence of locusts and measures to control it.

The minister was told that teams have been formed at the district level where locust swarms are present.

At least 25,833 acres of land has been sprayed with insecticides in 15 districts of the province to control the locusts, the minister was told.

To further control the roving swarms of locusts, Mohibullah was told that aerial spray will also be conducted.

The locusts entered K-P through Sherani, Mosakhel and Zhobs districts of Balochistan on January 25 this year and since then have spread to several southern districts of the province.

As a result, the provincial government had been forced to impose an emergency in all locust-hit districts of K-P on January 28. The emergency was later extended to other districts of the province which were affected by locusts.

Published in The Express Tribune, May 12th, 2020.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2219416/1-k-p-chalks-strategy-battle-locusts/>

CS ORDERS GOVT DEPTS TO COLLABORATE TO COMBAT LOCUSTS

By APP Published: May 12, 2020

LAHORE: Punjab Chief Secretary Jawwad Rafique Malik on Monday directed the departments concerned to work collectively on scientific lines to combat locust. "These departments include Provincial Disaster Management Authority (PDMA), Agriculture, Livestock and Forest."

He expressed these views while presiding over a meeting to review steps to control locust in the province. Senior Member Board of Revenue (SMBR) Babar Hayat Tarar, Agriculture secretary, PDMA director general and senior army officers attended the meeting. The SMBR told the meeting that 150 vehicles and 260 motorcycle were being used for spray in locust-affected areas and so far 114,406 hectares of land had been covered.

As many as 760 solo power were also being utilized for carrying out spray, he added. He further said that a working group headed by SMBR and comprising secretaries of different departments including Finance, Agriculture, Livestock and Forest was supervising the situation.

Similarly, a core committee consisting of Agriculture DG, PDMA DG, representatives of army and Cholistan Development Authority was working against the pest.

Published in The Express Tribune, May 12th, 2020.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2219454/1-cs-orders-govt-depts-collaborate-combat-locusts/>

ECC READY TO APPROVE FARM PACKAGE

By Zafar Bhutta Published: May 12, 2020

ISLAMABAD: The Economic Coordination Committee (ECC), which is scheduled to meet on Wednesday, is set to approve a Rs56-billion bailout package for the agriculture sector amid the growing impact of Covid-19 pandemic.

The government has already announced a stimulus package of over Rs1.2 trillion to cushion the impact of Covid-19. Out of this, Rs100 billion has been earmarked for giving relief to small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and the agriculture sector.

The Ministry of National Food Security and Research has prepared a package of incentives for farmers in various sub-sectors of the agriculture sector to help them to cope with the impact of Covid-19. The ministry has submitted its proposals for ECC's consideration.

The food security ministry has proposed a subsidy of Rs925 per bag of di-ammonium phosphate (DAP) and other phosphoric fertilisers and Rs243 per bag of urea and other nitrogen fertilisers. Total subsidy cost will be Rs37 billion.

Agrarian dilemma: Is the smart subsidy really smart for Pakistani farmers?

The subsidy scheme will be implemented by the provinces and funds will be disbursed through the scratch card scheme, already being implemented by Punjab. The subsidy on fertilisers has been proposed for the Kharif crop (April-October).

At present, the government gives subsidy to fertiliser manufacturers on gas supply that is said to be not fully passed on to consumers. This time, the government has decided to give a direct subsidy to the farmers.

Farmers have been facing high-interest rates of up to 18.4% on bank loans. This has been a major problem that has caused losses to them over the past few years as they cannot add adequate inputs to crops.

Now, the government has decided to reduce the mark-up on loans. However, the proposed rate of interest is still high that the farmers may not be able to afford.

At present, the mark-up on agricultural loans provided by Zarai Taraqati Bank Limited is 18.4%. A reduction to 10% has been proposed for 2020 for ECC's approval. The mark-up subsidy will require Rs8.8 billion.

A subsidy of Rs150 per kg of cottonseed has been recommended for the Kharif 2020 crop season in Punjab and Sindh. This subsidy will require an amount of Rs2.3 billion.

Another subsidy of Rs300 per bag of pesticides, meant for combating white fly, has been proposed. The subsidy will cover five million acres in Punjab and Sindh, which is around 80% of the cotton area. The total cost of the subsidy will be Rs6 billion.

The food security ministry has proposed 5% sales tax subsidy on locally manufactured tractors for one year. The total cost of the subsidy will be Rs2.5 billion. Sources said the finance ministry had endorsed the subsidy for the agriculture sector.

Published in The Express Tribune, May 12th, 2020.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2219479/2-ecc-ready-approve-farm-package/>

CHICKEN PRICES SHOOT UP

Aamir Shafaat Khan May 13, 2020

KARACHI: Retailers have raised the prices of chicken beyond the reach of many people as the live bird is selling at Rs230-240 per kg and meat at Rs350-400 per kg, showing an increase of Rs70-80 a kilo over the past few days.

Surprisingly, the official rate of live bird and its meat is Rs138 and Rs214 per kg but shopkeepers have neither displayed the price list, nor are they selling the bird at the control rate.

Poultry retailers are demanding Rs600 for boneless chicken as compared to Rs500 per kg.

Poultry traders say that prices usually crash on low demand and soar on high demand, but here they link the price hike to a short supply of birds from farms.

General secretary of the Sindh Poultry Wholesalers and Retailers Association Kamal Akhtar Siddiqui said in last week of March, poultry industry had warned consumers regarding price hike in coming months because farmers were not putting day-old chicks at their farms owing to massive decline in sale due to closure of wedding halls, restaurants, hotels, barbecues, etc, during the lockdown which was imposed in third week of March to control spread of coronavirus.

He said wholesale price of live bird had risen to Rs210 from Rs140 and meat to Rs367 from Rs245 per kg.

“Despite price hike, poultry is still cheaper when compared with veal meat prices of Rs600-700 per kg (with and without bones) and mutton at Rs1,200 per kg,” he said adding that even good quality fish was selling at Rs700 per kg.

The government had allowed online sale of food during limited hours slightly offsetting the negative impact of low chicken sale to some extent.

A number of people prefer to make chicken-related dishes at home rather than taking risk of ordering online food in view of lingering coronavirus threat.

Consumers are now paying the price of huge losses of poultry sector’s declining sales in March and April and the government’s price control machinery does not exist to rescue consumers, some observers said.

The government has remained focused towards dealing with the opening of different trades and finalising standard operating procedures (SOPs) for various industries since the start of lockdown.

However, with or without price list, stakeholders had continued to challenge the government’s writ in selling products on their own terms.

There is literally no fear among shopkeepers, wholesalers and product manufacturers to face any strict action like heavy fines or imprisonment against price hike, the observers added.

The Pakistan Poultry Association (PPA) in last week of March said that hatcheries had stopped setting eggs for chick production amid depressed sales.

Egg layers had also been culled, which was already showing signs of short supply of eggs.

Broiler breeders, which were consuming feed, had been sold at throwaway prices for meat.

From the above situation, birds supply in the markets would remain in short supply in coming months.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556656/chicken-prices-shoot-up>

RAHU REITERATES NEED FOR CENTRE'S HELP TO KEEP LOCUSTS AT BAY

The Newspaper's Staff Correspondent May 13, 2020

HYDERABAD: Sindh Minister for Agriculture Ismail Rahu has apprehended that locusts currently present in many districts of the province could cause heavy damage to the agriculture sector if not eliminated before rainfall.

“It’s the most dangerous enemy we are faced with after Covide-19,” he remarked while chairing a meeting of agriculture extension officials and later addressing a press conference at Shahbaz Hall here on Tuesday.

Mr Rahu was of the view that locusts would inflict a heavy loss to agricultural produce in Sindh and Punjab in the next few months as monsoon was approaching. The loss would ultimately cause food insecurity on a large scale, he added.

“It’s a major issue as the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and other international forums have already warned that locusts could attack Pakistan 10 times this year,” the minister said.

He told the meeting that the federal government should help Sindh carry out aerial spray to eliminate locusts’ swarms that had already devoured standing crops and green patches in many districts and were a potential threat to remaining agricultural fields in Sindh.

He noted that the swarms were constantly attacking certain districts over the past two months.

He recalled that the federal government had declared a ‘national emergency’ in January this year and prepared a national action plan to deal with the menace in three phases. “The first phase is near completion but no significant success has been achieved so far,” he pointed out, and regretted that no effective action was being taken while only meetings after meetings on the issue were being held.

The minister quoted surveys, conducted by some international organisations, suggesting that 300,000 square kilometre area of Pakistan could come under locust attack. The areas identified in the surveys were 50pc of Balochistan, 35pc of Sindh and 15pc of Punjab. “This means that 100,000sq-km area is vulnerable and 50,000sq-km area has already come under attack or threatened by the swarms existing in Sindh,” he said.

He, however, noted that this time, locusts swarms in Sindh appeared to be in transition and that was why they did not cause a huge loss to crops but during and after rainfall, they would definitely pose a serious threat to farmlands in the province. “The swarms are flying towards India but very likely to return in the rainy season,” he said, adding that myriads of swarms did exist in Iran as well and could enter Pakistan via Balochistan.

“We apprehend a three- or four-pronged invasion by locusts from the desert areas of Sindh targeting seven districts and this would be an alarming situation,” he said.

Mr Rahu called for effective and coordinated joint efforts by his department, federal plant protection department, National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) and other relevant departments to face the challenge. He noted that the army also stood by the Sindh government in this exercise.

Explaining Sindh's position in this context, the minister said aerial spray was the most effective method but there was only one aircraft without a pilot made available to the provincial government against the actual requirement of six each with a pilot. He said the available aircraft was meant for aerial spray in Sukkur district while five other ones were required for such operations in three other districts — Hyderabad, Mirpur-khas and Shaheed Benazirabad. Also, against the requirement of 25 sprayer-mounted vehicles, only five were made available to Sindh, he added.

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OTTON PRODUCTION SLIDE

By NUZHAT NAZAR on May 13, 2020

The Federal Cabinet on Tuesday decided that the support price of cotton should be fixed after thorough consultations with all the stakeholders in order to encourage farmers to sow more and more cotton as its cultivation has been woefully declining.

Prime minister Imran Khan, who chaired the cabinet's meeting, was in favour of giving subsidies on cotton seed and fertilizer, so that poor growers could benefit.

The cabinet also decided to amend laws on appointment of heads of various government institutions and autonomous bodies in the country. It also reviewed the audit reports relating to alleged embezzlement in the affairs of Karachi Port Trust (KPT).

After the federal cabinet meeting, Information Minister Senator Shibli Faraz, while giving a news briefing, said that a seven-point agenda was discussed in the cabinet meeting.

The information minister said a committee has been constituted to frame a law with regard to appointment of heads for government entities.

He said the committee will work under the supervision of Advisor for Institutional Reforms Dr Ishrat Hussain, which will present its recommendations within a week.

He said Minister for Narcotics Control Azam Khan Swati presented 39 proposals to the prime minister on electoral reforms, which the prime minister appreciated.

The information minister said the decisions of the Cabinet Committee on Energy were ratified in the meeting, while the prime minister directed to expedite the reforms in the energy sector.

Shibli Faraz also said that the PTI is the only party, which has introduced reforms in the electoral process, while reforms in the energy sector are the government's priority.

The information minister said the cabinet approved the names of the National Commission for the Status of Women but the members would be decided by the prime minister.

He said that the cabinet had approved the application of Pakistan Essential Services Act, 1952, on all employees of the National Institutional Facilitation Technology and the approval had been given for six months.

Shibli Faraz also said that the cabinet approved the appointment of member National Accounts and member Census in the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, and also approved the audit to rectify the irregularities in the affairs of the Karachi Port Trust (KPT).

The cabinet approved the names of the members of the National Commission for Status of Women and National Bureau of Statistics.

It also approved decisions taken by the Cabinet's Committee on Energy and Economic Coordination Committee.

The information minister said the cabinet reviewed matters pertaining to audit survey regarding embezzlement in Karachi Port Trust.

Senator Shibli Faraz said Prime Minister Imran Khan also sought a report regarding illegal and unlawful appointments in 12 different ministries within one week.

Talking about the coronavirus challenge, the minister said no country in the world can afford continuous lockdown, and a decision regarding ease in countrywide lockdown was taken in view of difficulties being faced by poor labour class.

He said the government has limited resources and infrastructure, and continuous lockdown was not possible under the prevailing conditions.

The minister urged the citizens and members of the civil society to adopt all necessary precautionary measures, follow guidelines and the SOPs, and support government in its endeavors to contain the pandemic.

APP adds: The PM said all the lacunas in the election laws would be addressed so that the people's trust in the election process was restored and nobody could raise a finger on the transparency of election. A transparent and credible electoral process was the foundation of democracy and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) was the only party which had taken serious efforts and practical steps for electoral reforms.

Expressing the government's commitment, the prime minister directed to intensify efforts so that electoral reforms process should be completed as soon as possible.

Shibli Faraz said the cabinet discussed the issue of unlawful appointments made in various ministries during the previous governments. It transpired that appointments without any cabinet approval were made in 12 ministries. Expressing his serious concern, the prime minister directed all the ministries to share details in next cabinet meeting so that action could be taken on the issue.

Senator Shibli Faraz said the cabinet also approved the names of the members of National Commission on the Status of Women, including Shaista Bukhari from Punjab, Habiba Hassan from Sindh, Rubina Naz Advocate from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Fatima Iqbal from Balochistan, Madhiha Sultana from AJK, Sosan Aziz from Gilgit Baltistan and Asia Azeem from the Federal Capital.

The minister said the PM directed steps for provision of energy to the consumers at affordable rates and reduction of the circular debt. He also directed the minister for energy to complete the process of reformation in various departments of the ministry with a time line.

He said Minister for Planning and Development Asad Umar gave a briefing on the steps being taken to control the coronavirus in the country and presented the report on the situation after relaxation in the lockdown.

Imran Khan remarked that activities in the construction and other sectors had even been allowed by the developed countries keeping in view the ground realities. Keeping the economy afloat and balancing security measures was imperative, he added.

Shibli Faraz it was observed that generally the people did not adopt precautionary measures and the cabinet appealed to them to strictly follow the standard operating procedures (SOPs) as the country could not afford a surge in the coronavirus cases.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/13/596489/country-on-the-brink-of-a-wheat-crisis-pbif-chief/>

PPA OPPOSES PUNJAB GOVT'S BID TO CONTROL POULTRY PRICES

By RECORDER REPORT on May 13, 2020

Pakistan Poultry Association (Northern Region) has urged the Punjab government to allow the free-market mechanism to regulate demand and supply instead of intervening in market prices.

PPA (Northern Region) Vice Chairman Chaudhry Muhammad Fargham while talking to media persons here on Tuesday said the industry was very hurt and depressed by the Punjab government's action of controlling the prices of live chicken and meat. He claimed that the commissioner animal husbandry in the ministry of national food security had submitted cost of production to the Chief Justice of Peshawar High Court as far back as in March 2012 at Rs 31.27 for day old chicks and Rs 132.50/kg for broilers. The current costs are around Rs 45 for day old chick and Rs 160 for broilers. As per calculation of Director PRI Rawalpindi, the cost of production is Rs.145 per kg live.

The association kept the government fully abreast of the situation through different means and said it would lead to an acute shortage of poultry products as the losses would result in a reduction in production and that prices will shoot up. "We had advised the government that in the event of an increase in price, supply would partially but gradually increase to some extent. We had strongly advised the government not to intervene in free-market mechanism but the governments paid no heed," he added.

He said now the market is allowing surviving farmers to recover their losses, the administration is arresting the sellers of chicken meat and forcing them to sell meat at Rs 260/Kg. Such actions would lead to long term closure of poultry farms, which would lead to not only a tremendous increase in chicken meat prices but also mutton, beef and pulses as well, he warned.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/13/596558/govt-committed-to-fulfill-commitments-under-27th-intl-conventions-tweets-pm/>

LOCUST ATTACKS COULD INCREASE TEN TIMES THIS YEAR, FEARS MINISTER

By RECORDER REPORT on May 13, 2020

Sindh Minister for Agriculture Mohammed Ismail Rahu has said that according to the agriculture experts of the world the swarms of locust attacks could be increased ten times more than those of the last year. He informed that the season of two

main crops of cotton and rice was about to start as well as monsoon season was going to start soon which was also the breeding season for locusts as well therefore three months of June, July and August were important in this regard.

This he said while presiding over a meeting about preventive measures for Locust attacks at Agriculture Extension Office, Shahbaz Building, Hyderabad on Tuesday.

The minister further said that swarms of locusts were attacking in Sindh like last year and this danger could not be avoided. He directed the officers concerned for stopping the breeding of locusts in deserted areas of Sindh which according to him could be effective. He said that all resources would be utilized for the elimination of locusts. He asked the officers concerned to take this task as challenge and utilize their expertise and experience to eliminate locusts and save standing crops. He underlined the need for focusing Mirpurkhas, Sukkur and Shaheed Benazirabad divisions situated near to Thar Desert which was the breeding area of locusts.

He said that Sindh Agriculture Department had remained busy for elimination of locusts for one year. Rahu also directed the officers concerned to resolve the problems of growers.

Director General Agriculture Hidayatullah Chajro briefed the meeting about preventive measures for locusts.

The participants of the meeting also gave suggestions for the prevention of locusts. Director Agriculture Shaukat Hussain Mastoi informed the meeting about the present situation of Subzi Mandi and other related issues.

Later Talking to media men, the minister said that the locusts had been present in Sindh for one year and couple of days earlier locusts attacked on crops in different parts of Hyderabad Division. He said that the Sindh government was continuously trying hard to prevent locusts. He informed that the different agriculture institutes of the world issued warning of locusts attacks in our region. He said that after Coronavirus the locusts were the biggest problem for Pakistan, the situation would be worsened in coming days, as locusts from Iran and India could attack in our country, he added. He informed that 57 teams were working for preventing locust attacks and now 41 more teams had been added for this purpose. He said that we were trying to make teams ready at taluka level to spray at any time and added that a helpline number had also been given to growers to inform about locusts' attack. Replying a question, he said that there was no conflict of Sindh with the federal government, we just demanded to federal Plant Protection Department for aerial spray.

He said that losses to crops were being estimated and soon details would be issued.

To a question, he said that due to Covid-19 the problems were being faced on wheat procurement but the Sindh government would achieve its target of wheat procurement. Replying another question, he said that due to Coronavirus, the export of mangoes would be affected.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/13/596455/locust-attacks-could-increase-ten-times-this-year-fears-minister/>

72 PERCENT OF WHEAT PROCUREMENT TARGET COMPLETED, CLAIMS MINISTER

By RECORDER REPORT on May 13, 2020

Punjab has achieved 72 percent of the 4.5 million tons of wheat procurement target set for the current year while 92 percent of 'baardana' (gunny bags) have been distributed among the farmers.

Food Minister Abdul Aleem Khan said this while replying to the questions of food department during the current session of Punjab Assembly. He said a coordinated policy has been implemented for the procurement of wheat in Punjab which has tried to bring direct benefits to common farmers. He also said that the government has ensured uninterrupted supply of "baardana" to the farmers all over the province. He said he himself is keeping an eye on wheat procurement drive and making on the spot checking of all the procedure and claimed no complaint has been received in this regard.

The Minister said that Punjab has set a target of purchasing 4.5 million metric tonnes of wheat which will be completed ahead of time. He said the Punjab government would also meet the wheat requirement of KPK by purchasing additional wheat while another 5 lakh metric tonnes is also under consideration for an extraordinary situation.

Aleem Khan assured that people of Punjab will not be facing the shortage of food grains. He claimed that the food department is fulfilling its responsibilities and all necessary steps are being taken to meet the requirements. He also answered various supplementary questions of the food department and informed the session about the steps taken by it for the betterment of this sector.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/13/596449/seven-2-percent-of-wheat-procurement-target-completed-claims-minister/>

90% BAGS FOR COLLECTING WHEAT DISTRIBUTED

By Our Correspondent Published: May 13, 2020

LAHORE: Provincial Senior Minister Abdul Aleem Khan has said that a coordinated policy has been implemented for the procurement of wheat in Punjab while trying to bring direct benefits to the farmers.

Replying to lawmakers' questions about the Food Department in the Punjab Assembly, he added that 72 per cent target of the procurement of wheat has been achieved in Punjab, while the distribution of 92 per cent bags to farmers has been completed for the purpose so far.

The minister said the Punjab government has ensured uninterrupted supply of sacks to the farmers all over the province this year. He told the house that he had inspected the wheat procurement drive and found no complaint on the ground.

He said Punjab has set a target of purchasing 4.5 million tonnes of wheat, which will hopefully be completed ahead of time. He said the Punjab government would also meet the wheat requirement of K-P besides. He said the additional purchase of 500,000 tonnes is also under consideration to meet an extraordinary situation.

The minister said illegal transportation of wheat in Punjab has been strictly curtailed and largescale operations have been carried out against hoarders without any discrimination.

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<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2220247/1-90-bags-collecting-wheat-distributed/>

FLOUR CRISIS FEARED AS PRICE GOES UP

Ali Hazrat Bacha May 14, 2020

PESHAWAR: The price of a 20kg wheat flour bag went up by Rs30 here on Wednesday as the local millers stopped supplies to hundreds of points selling flour in different parts of the provincial capital at subsidised rate.

Flour dealers of the main Rampura Market told Dawn that 20kg bag of mixed quality flour was sold for Rs920-Rs930 in the wholesale level against the previous rate of Rs870-Rs880 and the 20kg fine atta bag at Rs1,000.

The Bara Road wholesalers and retailers were found to have fixed the price at will.

According to the dealers, sales points were set up in different localities to provide flour to people at the controlled price of Rs808 per bag but they're closed at the moment.

They said wheat supply from Punjab had been suspended to the mills of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa leading to the closure of sales points.

Millers insist situation caused by halt to wheat supply from Punjab

The dealers said the flour price had increased in Punjab, where millers continuously demanded increase in wheat quota at the subsidised rate but the government didn't do so.

They added that the dealers of KP, too, had to purchase wheat at high price.

Meanwhile, the Pakistan Flour Mills Association, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, has warned a halt to the grinding of wheat over the suspension of supplies at subsidised rate from the provincial government.

It also feared a severe flour crisis in the province after Eidul Fitr.

"All of our 180 flour mills are to stop the grinding within a couple of days due to ban on wheat supply from Punjab KP flour mills," association president Haji Mohammad Iqbal told Dawn.

He demanded the lifting of the ban on wheat supply from Punjab to KP to control flour price hike.

Meanwhile, the millers led by Mohammad Naeem Butt and office-bearers of the Sarhad Chamber of Commerce and Industry also held a meeting at the chamber's offices with SCCI president Engineer Maqsood Anwar Pervaiz in the chair.

They demanded of Chief Minister Mahmood Khan to intervene and ensure the restoration of wheat supply from Punjab to KP.

The millers said the government of Punjab had imposed an 'unconstitutional' and 'unlawful' ban on wheat transportation to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and that ban was a clear violation of Article 151 of the Constitution.

"Our province is deficient in wheat, so it mostly depends on Punjab to fulfil its needs," a miller said.

He said wheat supply to local mills from the government's godowns had come to a halt and that all mills would be closed under the prevailing circumstances as there was no other option to acquire wheat.

The millers said due to the unavailability of wheat on the market, they were unable to continue supplying flour to the markets at the subsidised price, which had led to the fear of flour shortage across the province.

"We had earlier warned the government to take up the wheat ban issue with Sindh, Punjab and federal governments but they paid no attention," Mr Naeem Butt said.

He added that the entire responsibility rested with the provincial government.

The miller alleged that the current performance of the provincial government, especially food department, in the prevailing circumstances was very disappointing.

Mr Maqsood Pervaiz asked the government to lift the 'inter-provincial' ban on wheat supply from Punjab to KP to ensure the timely availability of wheat to local mills and fulfil the requirement of food commodity and avert any flour crisis in the province.

He said the economic and business activities had slowed down due to the prolonged coronavirus-induced lockdown, while the imposition of ban on the transportation of wheat and unavailability of wheat for local mills would lead to the closure of flour industry in the province.

The SCCI chief said the unavailability of wheat for KP flour mills was completely unjust and unbearable and that the ban on wheat transportation should be lifted immediately.

He urged Prime Minister Imran Khan, federal food minister and secretary and other authorities to take an immediate notice of the 'unconstitutional' and 'unlawful' inter-provincial restrictions on wheat supply and ensure the smooth availability of wheat of KP flour mills.

When contacted, food secretary Nisar Ahmad said the province had a stock of over 35,000 metric tons of wheat in its godowns but that was meant for emergency situation only.

"We regularly provide wheat quota to local mills but now Punjab has stopped supplies due to own requirements, so millers have to arrange wheat privately by themselves," he said.

The official said the province's mills had to depend 80 per cent on wheat from Punjab.

"KP markets have flour in sufficient quantity but wheat supply has been stopped by Punjab due to local procurement process," he said.

The secretary said wheat harvesting had begun in KP, so millers should acquire it to operate mills until the regular supply was made from official godowns.

He said the relevant authorities were well aware of the situation.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556928>

ECC OKAYS RS50BN FOR AGRICULTURE SECTOR

Khaleeq Kiani Updated May 14, 2020

ISLAMABAD: The government on Wednesday approved a Rs50 billion package for the agriculture sector and about Rs17bn additional funds to defence forces to foot extra fuel bills.

The decisions were taken at a meeting of the Economic Coordination Committee (ECC) of the Cabinet, presided over by Finance Adviser Dr Abdul Hafeez Shaikh, that also approved in principle a cell phone assembling policy.

The ECC was given a demand of Rs56.6bn agriculture package to provide the farmers subsidy on fertilisers, reduction in bank mark-up on agriculture loans, subsidy on cotton seed and white fly pesticides and sales tax subsidy on locally manufactured tractors as part Rs100bn earmarked for farmers and small and medium enterprises (SME) out of the Rs1,200bn coronavirus relief package.

However, Shaikh asked the food security ministry to rationalise it to Rs50bn as per its share in the overall Rs100 package announced for the SMEs and the agriculture sector.

He said the ECC had already approved a Rs50bn package for the former to provide indirect cash flow support to nearly 3.5 million people through pre-paid electricity.

Rs17bn set aside for defence forces' fuel bill

Under the agriculture package, about Rs37bn subsidy would be offered to farmers on the purchase of fertilisers. The amount would include a subsidy of Rs925 per bag on DAP and other phosphatic fertilisers and Rs243 per bag on urea and other nitrogen fertilisers.

The ECC was told that the estimated urea offtake would be around 3.04m tonnes while DAP was estimated at 0.95m tonnes for the Kharif season. The subsidy scheme will be implemented by the provinces and the amount will be disbursed through a scratch card scheme already in place in Punjab.

It was also informed that the fertiliser share in the cost of production for major crops was around 10-15 per cent and the provision of subsidy would increase their affordability to adopt the recommended level of fertiliser nutrient use and best agricultural management practices.

Similarly, under the agriculture package, a reduction in mark-up of agri loans at the total cost of Rs8.8bn, subsidy on cotton seed worth Rs2.3bn and white fly pesticides at Rs6bn were also approved.

Furthermore, the ECC called for inclusion of other banks along with Zarai Taraqiati in the scheme to enhance outreach of farmers with focus on subsistence farmers with a land holding of 12.5 acres. It was suggested that since markup had been reduced by the State Bank of Pakistan, the interest rates used in the proposal could also be rationalised accordingly.

The ECC called for the implementation mechanism, especially through the scratch card system, to be monitored carefully to ensure that the actual beneficiaries of the package were genuine farmers.

It was also pointed out that since with the provision of subsidy on fertilisers, their demand might increase, the same had to be communicated to the Ministry of Industries and Production (MoIP) in time to make arrangements accordingly.

The meeting approved a proposal by the Poverty Alleviation & Social Safety Division for disbursement of the Special Relief Package for the population living along the Line of Control in a single installment of Rs12,000 for six months from January-June while from July onwards, those families will be given monthly installments of Rs2,000 each until end of December.

The ECC took up different proposals for technical supplementary grants by various divisions and approved one by the Defence Division for a supplementary grant of Rs16.6bn to meet the expenses on POL, utilities and medical stores of the Defence Services.

In addition, it okayed Rs288m for payment of salaries to the employees of Pakistan Machine Tool Factory for the period from October 2019 to June 2020 and Rs40 million to the law ministry for employee-related costs and operating expenditures of the Federal Judicial Academy.

The ECC also discussed the Mobile Device Manufacturing Policy as proposed by the MoIP with the objectives of technology acquisition and localisation of mobile devices through domestic investment, joint ventures, FDIs, creation of 200,000 direct and indirect jobs, price reduction for consumers, increase in digitisation through supporting 4G/5G

technologies, development of efficient manufacturing ecosystem, exports of competitively manufactured handsets and achievement of security objectives.

It deliberated upon various components of the policy and approved in-principle with instructions to the MoIP to further fine-tune its various features and incentives for promoting localisation and research and development leading to export of mobile phones.

Lastly, the ECC gave green signal to the release of 35,000 tonnes of wheat from the Pakistan Agriculture Storage and Services Corporation to the Azad Jammu and Kashmir government at Rs1.52bn, including the cost of wheat and incidental charges, to be paid 50pc by the federal administration from the stimulus package announced to fight against Covid-19.

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UREA SALES DECREASE BY 18PC

The Newspaper's Staff Reporter May 14, 2020

ISLAMABAD: Urea sales dropped by 18 per cent to 240,000 tonnes in April compared to same period last year due to the ongoing coronavirus lockdown and locusts attacks in several parts of the country. Overall, urea sales fell by 12pc against the previous month.

Based on the latest sales data shared by the National Fertiliser Development Centre, the urea market seems to be under significant pressure with the accumulation of 850,000 tonnes inventory due to slowdown and other stress faced by agricultural sector.

The fertiliser industry began the year with an opening inventory of 600,000 tonnes. However, the inventory has continued to soar on the back of highest-ever quarterly production of 1.42 million tonnes by the manufacturers and declining sales volume.

If the same trend continues, the urea inventory could surge to an estimated 1m tonnes by the year-end.

This weakening off-take trend, which is expected to continue for rest of the year as well, points out to supply chain disruptions in the agricultural sector and a general slowdown in economy with the real GDP growth possibly contracting by 1.3pc.

Meanwhile, according to analysts have said that to support the farmers amid the Covid-19 crisis, the government is expected to announce a mega agriculture package of Rs63.8 billion for different agriculture related sectors which are hit by the virus outbreak.

Besides the fallout of Covid-19 pandemic, the urea demand is expected to be adversely affected by record locust infestation that threatens to destroy cotton, wheat, maize and other crops.

As a result, the urea consumption is likely to decline by around 10pc to 5.2m tonnes. This demand can easily be met by the production capacity of indigenous gas-based urea manufacturers, which is estimated to touch around 5.8m tonnes in 2020.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556945/urea-sales-decrease-by-18pc>

KP MILLERS DEMAND LIFTING OF BAN ON WHEAT SUPPLY FROM PUNJAB

By AMJAD ALI SHAH on May 14, 2020

Flour millers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have demanded of the federal government to lift ban on wheat supply from Punjab to ensure timely availability of wheat to local mills and fulfill requirement of food commodity and avert to create flour crisis in the province.

The demand was made by a delegation of flour millers, led by Pakistan Flour Mills Association Khyber Pakhtunkhwa chairman Muhammad Iqbal and group leader, Muhammad Naeem Butt during a meeting with Sarhad Chamber of Commerce and Industry president, Engineer Maqsood Anwer Pervaiz on Wednesday.

The flour millers apprised the meeting that the Government of Punjab had imposed 'unconstitutional' and 'unlawful' ban on wheat transportation to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which was clear contradiction of article 151 of the constitution of the country.

"KP is wheat-deficient province, mostly depending on Punjab to fulfill the food requirement in the province, the millers said. On the other hand, they added that wheat supply was stopped to local mills from government godowns and all mills will be shut down under the prevailing circumstances.

The flour millers said owing to non-availability of wheat in market, they are not able to supply flour to the markets, which has led to fear of shortage of flour across the province.

"We had earlier warned the provincial government to take up the issue of ban on wheat supply with Sindh, Punjab and the federal government, but they paid no attention," Naeem Butt said. He added the entire responsibility now lies on the PTI-led provincial government.

SCCI chief said unavailability of wheat to KP flour mills is completely unjust and unbearable and the ban on wheat transportation should be lifted immediately.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/14/596771/kp-millers-demand-lifting-of-ban-on-wheat-supply-from-punjab/>

NDMA READIES TACKLE LOCUST INFESTATION

OUR CORRESPONDENT May 14, 2020

ISLAMABAD. To avert the impending locust attack, National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) Chairman Lt-Gen Muhammad Afzal on Wednesday said that arrangements have been made for timely land and aerial spray in the stricken regions.

"Around two planes for spraying-out of which one was ordered from Turkey-and five helicopters have been readied to tackle the impending locust attack in the country," he said while addressing a press conference in Islamabad.

Experts have already warned of severe locust attack in the region. “It is predicted that Pakistan and Iran will face the worst desert locust outbreak in 50 year,” Iranian Ambassador to Pakistan Seyed Mohammad Ali Hosseini had said in an article titled ‘The challenge to food security: a new agenda for regional cooperation’.

Machines have also been installed in the suspected areas, the NDMA chairman said, adding that China has provided spray and sprayers to help Pakistan handle the situation.

Briefing about the relief activities, Lt-Gen Afzal said the government has so far procured over 100,000 tonnes of medical items from China through 11 flights. “To ensure transparency in the buying and delivery of the items all rules were followed,” he added. The government had opted to follow the self-reliant approach for making ventilators and other medical equipment after the demand and prices for such items shot up.

“Because of the NDMA efforts, the production of medical items started in local markets,” he said, “Today we are buying all the stuff from local markets that saved valuable amount of out funds.”

The NDMA chairman said the authority would review the possibility of exporting locally produced medical items after ensuring the availability of 3-4 months of stock.

Lt-

Gen Afzal said: “There is one month of stock available in the NDMA warehouse.”

https://epaper.tribune.com.pk/DisplayDetails.aspx?ENI_ID=11202005140457&EN_ID=11202005140151&EMID=11202005140049

COMMERCE ADVISER TESTIFIES BEFORE SUGAR PROBE COMMISSION

Ishaq Tanoli | Mubarak Zeb Khan Updated May 15, 2020

ISLAMABAD/KARACHI: Adviser to the Prime Minister on Commerce Razak Dawood on Thursday appeared before an inquiry commission investigating a sugar scam and recorded his statement on the decisions taken by the Sugar Advisory Board regarding export of the commodity.

The commission had also summoned Sindh Chief Minister Syed Murad Ali Shah, but he refused to appear before it and said the issue pertained to the province of Punjab.

Mr Dawood is the fifth high-profile figure to appear before the commission looking into the sudden spike in sugar and wheat prices last year. The commission is tasked with issuing a forensic audit report on the 2019 sugar and wheat crises.

Mr Dawood confirmed to Dawn that he appeared before the commission to record his statement, but declined to provide any details. He said he would not talk to the media on the issue.

However, when pressed to share some of the issues raised during the hearing, the premier’s adviser said he would make his position clear on Friday (today). “I will issue a statement on May 15 to clarify my position,” he said.

Mr Dawood’s statement before the commission may be very important given that soon after the release of the first report on the sugar and wheat crises the prime minister took away the portfolio of ministry of industries and production from

him and that of ministry of food security from Khusro Bakhtiar. Mr Bakhtiar was later given the portfolio of economic affairs.

Mr Dawood as chairman of the Sugar Advisory Board had proposed to the Economic Coordination Committee (ECC) of the federal cabinet that export of sugar might be allowed. The ECC allowed export of 1.1 million tons of sugar in October and December of 2018.

Out of the total allocation of the quota, only about 750,000 tons of sugar was exported. The average retail price of sugar was Rs53.75 per kilogram in 2017-18, Rs61.43 in 2016-17, Rs64.03 in 2015-16 and Rs58.91 in 2014-15, respectively. The price of sugar increased to about Rs80 per litre when the sugar crisis was at its peak by the end of December 2019.

An increase of Re1 in the price of sugar at the retail level means the net spending of Rs5.1 billion by the consumers. The yearly consumption of sugar in the country is between 5m and 6m tons.

An earlier inquiry report filed by the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) on the crisis had revealed the names of some bigwigs, including Jahangir Tareen, a former secretary general of the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf, and close relatives of leaders of the party's allies, who had allegedly benefited from the crisis.

However, the government constituted the inquiry commission in the first week of April and asked it to submit a forensic audit report on April 25. This deadline was later extended till May 16.

The inquiry commission headed by the director general of FIA, Wajid Zia, had requested Murad Ali Shah twice to appear before the panel.

In response, Sindh's Advocate General Salman Talibuddin sent a letter to the FIA head on Wednesday, in which he said it was evident from the findings of an inquiry committee that all acts of omission and commission responsible for the alarming increase in the price of sugar were centred in and confined to Punjab.

"Given this, we find it difficult to understand why the government of Sindh is being dragged into the quagmire created by the government of Punjab and is being asked to provide a briefing (on) the years 2017-2018 which cannot conceivably have any bearing on the task assigned to the sugar inquiry commission. For your information, during 2017-2018 the price of sugar (was) actually reduced, at least in the province of Sindh," the letter contended.

It was evident from the inquiry commission's own report that the Sindh chief minister was not asked to appear before the inquiry committee throughout the period in which it was functioning to brief it on the issue of subsidy granted by the provincial government in 2017-18 on the export of sugar over and above the subsidy allowed by the federal government, the letter said.

It said that nobody from Sindh had featured in the inquiry committee's report as having played any part in or being responsible in any way for causing illegal increase in the price of sugar on account of the events that took place exclusively in Punjab.

"It is clear from the report of inquiry committee as well as the contents of DG FIA's letter dated March 16 that all matters falling within paragraph 3(k) of the terms of reference have been inquired into and findings in respect of them have been given and all that has been recommended now (is) the conduct of verification of the source reports through forensic audit and physical stock-taking of a few of the mills identified in the committee's report," it added.

The provincial law officer in the letter further contended that asking the chief minister to appear before the commission did not fall within its terms of reference set out in the interior ministry's notification issued on March 16. The message asked the FIA chief to immediately withdraw his letters issued on May 11 and 13 on the subject.

Published in Dawn, May 15th, 2020

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1557205>

SMUGGLING, HOARDING POSE THREAT TO FOOD SECURITY: PM IMRAN

By Rizwan Shehzad Published: May 15, 2020

ISLAMABAD: Prime Minister Imran Khan was on Thursday informed of the various measures taken to make the recently promulgated anti-smuggling ordinance more effective.

While chairing a high-level meeting on smuggling, hoarding and profiteering, the premier was told that the ordinance takes stricter measures against elements involved in smuggling of currency and essential commodities.

The meeting was informed that law enforcement agencies had been empowered to take action against smuggling within five kilometres of borders and at airports. The new law also authorised relevant law enforcement agencies to take into custody elements involved in trafficking.

Further, coordination had been improved between district administration, customs officials, security agencies and law enforcement agencies so as to ensure effective prevention of smuggling.

The chairperson of the Federal Board of Revenue briefed the meeting on the steps taken thus far after the implementation of the Anti-Smuggling Ordinance.

The meeting was informed that provincial chief secretaries had been given a detailed briefing on measures to curb smuggling.

Addressing the meeting, the prime minister said that smuggling was a menace to the country's economy. He said that smuggling harms the national economy in two ways. Firstly, it poses a threat to the country's food security causing the public to suffer because of a shortage of basic necessities.

Secondly, said the PM, smuggling causes irreparable damage to the country's industries, that hampers industrial process.

He said there would be no concession or compromise on the action against smuggling.

The prime minister directed all relevant departments to submit reports on the prevention of smuggling and action taken against those involved in the act after every 15 days so that progress in this regard may be continuously monitored.

The provincial chief secretaries apprised Khan on the situation of wheat production, harvesting and overall situation.

The meeting also reviewed the prices of basic commodities, and the provincial chief secretaries also briefed the prime minister in detail about the steps taken to bring down these prices.

Reports on action taken against hoarders and profiteers by the provincial governments was also presented to the prime minister.

Minister for Industry Hamad Azhar briefed the meeting on the efforts being taken to bring down the prices of cement, steel, cooking oil and other essential items.

While directing the provincial authorities regarding possible steps to bring down the prices of basic necessities, the PM said that reducing the prices of petrol, especially diesel, by the government was to provide relief to the people.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2221423/1-smuggling-hoarding-pose-threat-food-security-pm-khan/>

FLOUR MILLERS BEGIN NATIONWIDE STRIKE TODAY

The Newspaper's Correspondent May 17, 2020

TAXILA: The All Pakistan Flour Mills Association (APFMA) has announced a nationwide strike starting today (Sunday) to protest the food department and government's behaviour towards millers, which they say violate the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between millers and the food department.

The association's vice chairman Sheikh Mohammad Saeed and other office-bearers from Punjab told media on Saturday that their mills were being raided, they were being threatened of registration of cases and imposition of fines and were not being allowed to hold wheat for grinding.

Mr Saeed said the central body of the association has called a strike, and millers across the province will stop grinding and supplying flour to markets starting Sunday until the relevant departments assure them they will not raid mills unnecessarily, and that they will allow wheat stock to be held for 72 hours for washing and grinding.

He said that the suspension of the flour supply would hit the public hard in Ramazan if the government does not address millers' grievances.

"Flour millers have given the government and food department adequate time to procure wheat from growers, but the step-motherly attitude of the administration and food department officials is uncalled for, as they are conducting raids in various districts across Punjab and not allowing even 200 bags of wheat to be held for washing and grinding," he said.

Mr Saeed said flour millers have holding rights to store an adequate stock of wheat, but government functionaries not only confiscate the wheat but also book millers in cases, in violation of the MoU between flour millers and the government.

Sheikh Zeeshan, a member of the Punjab association, said: "We have taken the decision after receiving directions from office bearers of the central executive committee of the association to go on strike from Sunday."

He added: "This is not a token protest, but a complete shutdown until the demands are met by concerned government departments."

Published in Dawn, May 17th, 2020

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1557640/flour-millers-begin-nationwide-strike-today>

IMPENDING LOCUST ATTACK ON COTTON

By RECORDER REPORT on May 17, 2020

Impending locust attack on cotton is making cotton growers worry that if the preventive measures will not be taken, this year cotton yield will be low as compared to previous years. The growers of Matiari, Bhtishah, Hala and other surrounding areas of Hyderabad city are under the threat of locust attack.

The agriculture experts and civil society activists are demanding timely measures to counter locust threat. The said that it is another emergency situation for the province much like Covid-19 pandemic. This need urgent attention for fumigation campaigns against the locust attack.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/17/597740/impending-locust-attack-on-cotton/>

SUDAN INFLATION SOARS TO 99PC AS FOOD PRICES RISE

By Agence France-Press on May 16, 2020

Soaring inflation, a scarcity of foreign currency and a huge public debt are among the country's most pressing challenges.

KHARTOUM: Inflation in Sudan jumped to 99 percent because of rising food prices, official figures showed Saturday, more than a year after the country was rocked by protests sparked by bread price hikes.

The inflation rate in April shot up from 82 percent the previous month due to increased prices of grains, meat, milk and bread, according to the Sudanese Central Bureau of Statistics.

Despite Sudan's political transition, which has raised hopes of more reforms, the economy remains in deep crisis.

Soaring inflation, a scarcity of foreign currency and a huge public debt are among the country's most pressing challenges.

Many in Sudan still have to queue for hours to buy bread.

A tripling of the price of bread was the trigger for the first street protests against long-time autocrat Omar al-Bashir in December 2018.

The mass demonstrations went on for months before the army deposed Bashir on April 11, 2019.

Last month, Sudanese authorities announced an increase in bread prices, meaning one Sudanese pound (about two US cents) now buys only a 50-gram loaf of bread, compared to one weighing 70 grams previously.

<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/16/597650/sudan-inflation-soars-to-99pc-as-food-prices-rise/>

SURGING LOCUST ATTACKS POSE GREAT THREAT TO FOOD SECURITY

By Agencies Published: May 17, 2020

While the government and the urban population are struggling against the speedily spreading Covid-19, farmers in Pakistan's main food-producing pockets have been haunted by a plague of locust swarms which are sweeping green fields with their devastating instinct to eat heavily.

Locust swarms triggered panic among villagers in Punjab as their crop was fine one evening but a lot of leaves had been eaten up a day later. They fear that if the situation prevails it would finish all cash crops, animals' fodders and fruits like it did with wheat crop in Sindh.

The desert locust plague affected Pakistan's southern Sindh province last year before moving to the rest parts of the country. The Ministry of National Food Security and Plant Protection and other departments all came up with a response to the fly attacks.

Assistant Director of Agriculture Pest Warning in Chakwal district Muhammad Riaz told Xinhua that the swarm, scattered in two groups, had affected around 400 acres crops in less than 48 hours, posing a big threat to crops in the area.

According to the food security ministry, the locusts has imposed a loss of 15% to the winter-sown crops last year amounting to at least Rs100 billion, with fears that the damage would be huge if the next generation hatched.

The report added that the locust attacks could cause Rs817 billion loss to the country's agriculture production in 2020. The United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization estimates agricultural losses to Pakistan from locusts could be as high as \$2.2 billion for winter crops alone.

Earlier in January, the government imposed a national emergency on locust control. This week, the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) said the department has planned to spray 500,000-hector land because the numbers of locusts are increasing earlier and speedily.

The FAO said in its latest update that adult groups were migrating to the Indian border from breeding areas in Balochistan and the Indus Valley where hopper groups had been present as well as in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

It added the situation was also threatening in Iran where hopper bands are maturing along the southwestern coastal plains and another generation of breeding was underway on the coast near Jask and in the interior of Sistan-Balochistan province, which borders Pakistan.

In India, more adult groups and small swarms arrived from Pakistan in the past few days and moved east into Rajasthan, reaching Jodhpur. Some swarms could continue further east. Control operations are underway in all three countries.

The Iranian media quoted an agricultural ministry official as saying that Tehran might use the military for a second year to help fight locusts in the south of the country, as the swarms threaten to destroy crops worth more than \$7 billion.

Mohammad Reza Mir, a spokesman for the ministry's Plant Protection Organisation (PPO), said this week that the desert locusts had attacked more than 494,000 acres of orchards and farmland in seven of Iran's 31 provinces, the semi-official news agency ILNA reported.

The affected areas, stretching from eastern Iran on the border with Pakistan to the southwestern border with Iraq, were likely to soon increase to 1 million hectares, Mir told ILNA. "The military have promised to help fight the desert locusts, including by providing all-terrain vehicles for use in areas which are hard to access," Mir told ILNA.

PPO's head, Mohammad Reza Dargahi, said last month that locust swarms threatened 1,250 trillion rials (\$7.4 billion) worth of agricultural products across six provinces in southern Iran, the daily Financial Tribune reported.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2223232/1-surg-ing-locust-attacks-pose-great-threat-food-security/>

PUNJAB'S AGGRESSIVE WHEAT POLICY RILES UP MILL OWNERS

By Aamir Naveed Published: May 17, 2020

LAHORE: While flour mills have increased the prices of their product due to non-availability of wheat at official rates, the food department has adopted an aggressive strategy to meet the procurement target.

However, the Flour Mills Association has announced a strike in Punjab against raids on mills by the Food Department.

Pakistan Flour Mills Association's Central Chairperson Asim Raza, while talking to The Express Tribune, said that the staff of food department is harassing the owners and conducting raids on mills.

The department has allowed mills to store wheat for 72 hours of threshing but they do not even have wheat for 48 hours of threshing. Despite this, the district administration and food department officials are raiding the mills and picking up wheat.

He maintained that the officers of the food department are unnecessarily harassing the owners of flour mills to achieve their target.

He also said that wheat purchased from other parts of the province is not being allowed to reach Lahore. Raza said raids were carried out on flour mills in Multan, Dera Ghazi Khan, Sargodha, Gujrat and other areas and cases were being registered against the owners.

He alleged that after entering a mills in Sargodha, officials had asked the management to buy 50,000 sacks of wheat. Similarly, vehicles carrying wheat were being seized at the gates of mills in DG Khan. All the mills in Sargodha have been closed for the last three days.

Raza said flour mills in Sindh were buying wheat freely and also storing it, but those in Punjab were not allowed to buy wheat.

He said the provincial food department was trying to achieve its target by harassing mill owners, which was not possible. He said the owners had decided to close the mills in Punjab.

The mills have increased flour prices by up to Rs2 per kilogramme. The price of a 20kg bag of flour has gone up from Rs805 to Rs825 and that of a 10kg bag from Rs400 to Rs420.

Punjab Flour Mills Association Chairperson Abdul Rauf Mukhtar, while talking to The Express Tribune, said that per maund price of wheat in the open market had increased by more than Rs100.

The government is not releasing wheat and owners are buying wheat from the open market. At present, the per maund price of wheat in the markets is about Rs1,500.

He said flour mills are buying expensive wheat and providing cheap flour to the people. Therefore, an increase in prices was inevitable.

According to sources, the Punjab Food Department had set a target of purchasing 4.5 million metric tonnes of wheat but so far only 3.5 million tonnes has been procured.

Thus, the food department is facing a shortfall of one million tonnes in the procurement. The procurement of wheat is to be completed by the first week of June. The procurement season is coming to an end but the food department does not have time to meet the target due to the coming Eidul Fitr holidays.

Published in The Express Tribune, May 17th, 2020.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2223107/1-punjabs-aggressive-wheat-policy-riles-mill-owners/>

PAKISTAN GETS BIG SHARE IN RICE MARKETS

By APP Published: May 17, 2020

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan has attained a huge space in the global rice market for exporting local rice in potential markets of Middle East, North America and African regions to achieve the target of increasing the agricultural exports, said Adviser to Prime Minister on Commerce Abdul Razak Dawood.

Talking to APP on Saturday, he said that the government intended to uplift exports to their highest level ever and for that purpose, it was taking different measures to reclaim traditional markets besides accessing new ones.

He added that a rice delegation from Mexico would hopefully arrive in Pakistan in June to appraise various rice exporters to attain permission for exporting rice to Mexico.

The adviser said the all members of the Rice Exports Association Pakistan (REAP) should prepare themselves for this opportunity so that maximum exporters could receive approvals for orders in the Mexican market.

Dawood said that rice was the largest agri-export commodity in the country's export basket with a total value of over \$2 billion, which would be increased to \$5 billion in the next five years.

He urged the local rice exporters to introduce new varieties by investing in research and development to enhance production and quality.

Replying to a question, he said that even in the current critical situation, the country's food exports to the Middle Eastern market, especially meat and poultry, have increased compared to the same period of previous year.

Replying to another question, he stressed the need for making preparations to exploit the economic and trade opportunities expected to emerge post Covid-19 pandemic.

“We expect more opportunities to promote bilateral trade and strengthen linkages with potential markets including European Union, China, Middle East and African region besides promoting regional trade in post pandemic environment,” he said.

He underlined that the pandemic would bring a paradigm shift and will create great opportunities, adding that the coronavirus had changed the world and now the business processes would be completely different.

Dawood said that the government was focusing equally on all sectors of the economy including textile, non-textile and agriculture and engineering sectors to build export potential of the country in coming months.

Talking about the external trade situation during the past three months, he said exports had declined in April 2020 by around 54% compared to the same month of last year and the reason behind the decline was obviously the spread of coronavirus across the world.

Dawood said that the government was prioritising ‘Made in Pakistan’ policy to boost local production and reduce dependence on import and enhance exports.

Published in The Express Tribune, May 17th, 2020.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2223039/2-pakistan-gets-big-share-rice-markets/>

NEWS COVERAGE PERIOD FROM MAY 11TH TO 17TH

DIESEL SHORTAGE, POL PRICES CUT MAY HAMPER WHEAT HARVESTING

Amjad Mahmood May 11, 2020

LAHORE: There seems to be no let-up in the miseries of the farmers as the authorities remain apathetic to the diesel shortage being faced by them in the middle of the wheat harvesting season.

Reports of unavailability of diesel in the market had started doing rounds a couple of days after downward revision of the rates of petroleum products on April 30 in line with the sharp decline in their prices in the world market.

Almost all oil marketing companies stopped placing orders with the international suppliers as soon as the Oil and Gas Regulatory Authority (Ogra) hinted at proposing a cut in oil prices.

Already suffering because of shortage of labour due to Covid-19 lockdown, wheat growers are facing another unexpected crisis amid the harvesting season in the form of unavailability of diesel to run their tractors and threshing machines. This may lead to delay in harvesting.

Farmers riding their tractor-trolleys and pick-ups carrying barrels and jerry cans can be seen queuing up at the filling stations to get diesel, particularly in Bhakkar, Layyah and Mianwali districts of Punjab. In most cases, they return empty-handed or get a few litres of diesel.

“At a time when I should have been in my lands to oversee wheat harvesting, I’m forced to line up at petrol pumps to get diesel for my tractor-run thresher,” laments Rana Haider, a farmer from Thal area in Bhakkar.

Talking to Dawn by phone, he says that he has lost his three precious days in search of diesel but failed to find the product and he is paying rent for the threshing machine without using it.

Saeed Baloch, a petrol pump owner in Mianwali, claims the oil marketing companies have introduced quota regimes since April 30 for the first time on the basis of average calculated on the yearly basis and thus are providing them one-fourth of the supplies against the demand.

The companies are also delaying the supplies contrary to their normal routines, he alleges, explaining that he would get oil supply the next day of placing the order. But, since the recent cut in prices, this gap between placement of order and supplies has widened to the minimum four days, creating a severe shortage particularly of diesel, he adds.

He wonders why the government didn’t manage the situation while the state-run Pakistan State Oil had flagged the issued in the first week of May.

An official of the PSO Lahore region alleges that the private oil marketing companies (OMCs) are not supplying petroleum products to their respective dealers and thus the whole pressure has been diverted to the PSO outlets. He says that his entity is supplying one million litres of diesel daily only in Lahore region to meet the wheat harvesting-related demand.

A petroleum dealer, Rehmat Khan Wardag, says OMCs have not placed orders for the import of petroleum products since the recent cut in oil prices. He says the OMCs suffered billions of rupees losses in the process and fears that the volatile situation in the world markets will keep them away from the business in coming weeks, which may lead to severe shortage of oil, particularly diesel, in the local market.

He has urged the government to import oil on its own without delay to fend off the hovering shortage that may plunge the sectors dependent on diesel, particularly the agriculture sector, into a severe crisis.

Published in Dawn, May 11th, 2020

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556190>

FOOD OFFICIAL MANHANDLED BY TOWN COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN FOR INTERCEPTING WHEAT STOCK

Dawn Report May 11, 2020

UMERKOT: Harassment and manhandling of a food department official by Samaro town committee chairman late on Saturday evening sent a wave of anger among food officials across the town. An emergency meeting of senior food officials was held on Sunday to condemn the incident.

It was gathered that food inspector Iftikhar Arain, along with a police team, intercepted a consignment of 1,200 wheat bags of 40-kg each while it was being transported by two trucks to some other district. The action was taken as part of the ongoing campaign against hoarding/illegal movement of wheat stocks which was causing an artificial shortage of the commodity and wheat flour in the province.

According to Mr Arain, when he impounded one truck-load of wheat and chased the other truck, Samaro town committee chairman, Rafique Ahmed Qaimkhani, who belonged to the ruling Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), along with some other persons intervened and harassed him to deter him from discharging his official duty. "Qaimkhani abused and held me hostage for some time and then slapped me when I did not agree to come to his terms," alleged Mr Arain.

He said he intended to recover more than 14,000 other wheat bags hoarded in his area of operation to prevent the stocks from being shifted to some other district/province in violation of the relevant ban imposed by the provincial government.

Escorted by a police force, the officials recovered more than 1,00,000 wheat bags and sealed off the mills.

Reacting angrily to the incident, senior food officials held a meeting under the chairmanship of Mohammed Hussain Mahar to discuss the issue. Ghulam Nabi Soomro, Iftikhar Arain and other senior officials including heads of all procurement centres in the district attended the meeting.

The meeting condemned the town committee chairman's act of hooliganism as unacceptable. It said Qaimkhani's attempt of obstructing the food official from performing his duty was unlawful. Appropriate action must be taken against him and those who accompanied him in this unlawful act, it added.

The meeting participants said no one was above the law and, as such, could not be allowed to stop any official from performing duty in line with the orders issued by government.

They resolved to stop performing their official duties pertaining to wheat procurement if action was not taken against the offenders.

SUKKUR: Raids were conducted in three flour mills in the Salehpat town as the drive against hoarders of wheat continued in Sukkur district, food officials said on Saturday.

In Jacobabad, district food controller Asghar Soomro along with Assistant Commissioner of Garhi Khero Sanaullah Bhatti carried out a raid on a rice mill in Dao Jahanpur on the orders of Deputy Commissioner Ghazanfar Ali Qadri.

NAUSHAHRO FERZE: District food controller Qareebullah Soomro said on Saturday that around 145,500 wheat bags were recovered in raids on several godowns in grain markets of Bhiriya Road, Kandiaro, Mehrabpur and Khan Wahan towns.

The raiding team found more than 20,000 wheat bags clandestinely stocked there. The stocks were seized and the rice mill was sealed, the officials said.

He told local reporters around 40,000 wheat bags were recovered in Khan Wahan, 35,000 in Mehrabpur, 11,500 in Kandiaro and 60,000 in Bhiriya Road.

All the godowns were sealed, he added.

Published in Dawn, May 11th, 2020

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556097/food-official-manhandled-by-town-committee-chairman-for-intercepting-wheat-stock>

SUKKUR NAB READIES FOUR REFERENCES ON WHEAT SCAM

The Newspaper's Correspondent May 11, 2020

SUKKUR: The Sukkur region of the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) has prepared four references concerning misappropriation of billions of rupees worth of wheat in food department and is ready to file them in accountability court, according to sources.

Sources in the NAB said the references would be filed after seeking formal approval of the bureau's chairman. In this connection, a meeting of NAB's regional board presided over by its Sukkur director general reviewed the scam in Sukkur, Larkana and Shaheed Benazirabad divisions and accorded approval to the references prepared against the corrupt officials of food department.

The sources said the NAB chairman himself had issued directives to file the references over growing complaints about large-scale corruption in food department in different districts of the province.

The sources said that a reference accused deputy director food Anees-ur-Rehman Mahar, district food controller Mohammad Iqbal Memon and others of Rs128 million corruption and another reference blamed Khairpur district food controller Mohammad Ali Ujjan and others of more than Rs58m graft in the stored grain.

The third reference accused Larkana district food controller Zahid Ali Unnar and others of Rs870m corruption and the fourth blamed Kandhkot-Kashmore's deputy director of food Fazal Mohammad Bhangwar and others of more than Rs74m graft.

Published in Dawn, May 11th, 2020

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556096/sukkur-nab-readies-four-references-on-wheat-scam>

IT'S A SEASON OF MANGOES AND COVID-19

Mohammad Hussain Khan May 11, 2020

THE season of the king of fruits — mangoes — has started. But this year, it starts amidst serious concerns of coronavirus spreading in Sindh's rural areas since thousands of labourers arrive from South Punjab, mainly Muzaffargarh. Under the current circumstances, allowing them to enter Sindh is risky since this may allow the contagion to spread in rural areas which, by and large, have remained safe compared with urban areas.

To harvest mangoes, big orchard owners let out their farms to contractors. Punjab's labourers – hired by the orchard contractors – have begun to arrive in Sindh's mango farms, which are larger, through different means of transport, while consignments from these farms have started reaching Punjab.

Till May 7, the Sindh government was debating standard operating procedures (SOPs) to let these workers enter the province. Draft SOPs have been presented to the Sindh government by Sharjeel Inam Memon, an orchard owner who is a Sindh Assembly member from Hyderabad's rural area. He had raised this issue of Punjab's labourers with the government as they turned up in thousands.

“I have discussed SOPs with the Sindh chief minister and he has not yet finalised them. We are trying to see the situation is handled adroitly,” says Mr Memon, an influential member of Sindh's ruling party.

Among other measures, the 11-point draft recommends that growers/contractors provide a list of workers from other provinces. It also states enrollment forms will have to be filled and submitted before revenue officials within five working days of labourers commencing work. Items such as gloves, masks and hand sanitisers have to be provided to those working along the entire mango value chain.

Every grower has to try to engage the maximum number of local labourers and minimise hiring from elsewhere for plucking and packing purposes. If a worker develops Covid-19 symptoms, he has to be sent for a checkup. A proforma has to be filled by each worker for tracking and tracing purposes.

‘There is no rocket science involved which would prevent local labour from learning to pluck or pack mangoes. Previously, nobody thought of departing from the conventional practice of labour coming in from Punjab to Sindh because there was no reason for it’

The Sindh government is continuously resisting pressure from the PTI-led federal government, as well as the business community, to ease the lockdown. The chief minister had even differed, rightly so, with the 20-point SOPs mutually agreed between the ulema and President Arif Alvi on Taraweeh prayers in Ramazan to stem the spread of the contagion. He feared the SOPs will not be implementable therefore sought to restrict prayer congregations.

Currently, Sindh health officials dealing with the Covid-19 situation and pandemic trajectory believe May is going to be tough from the point of view of a spike in the number of cases. “We are bracing for an exponential rise in cases if the

lockdown is eased,” observes a Sindh health official associated with monitoring the Covid-19 situation. “The impact of the decision taken for opening up of businesses will be seen after a fortnight,” he asserted.

Labourers have already started to arrive unchecked in Sindh from Punjab where an upward trend in the number of cases can be seen, and more are on their way. It is a foregone conclusion that the SOPs specific to mango workers will not be doable, any more than those that were drafted for prayer congregations.

“I think this is an opportunity that can bring local labourers forward and help overcome unemployment currently seen in the pandemic’s backdrop,” says Sindh agriculture minister Ismail Rahu, who is the son of hari leader Fazil Rahu. The real issue, he opines, pertains to big farms that are let out to contractors who hire workers from Punjab. “One expert worker brought from Punjab for each farm should be enough, the rest should be purely local labourers to handle the mango crop this season. This is how they will get trained as well,” he remarks.

The issue of workers from Punjab coming to Sindh has surfaced for the first time because of the pandemic, otherwise, it was conventional practice for orchard owners and contractors. Locally known as bharawa and thukawa, labour from Punjab has picked, sorted and packed mangoes with dexterity for years.

The contractors’ argument is since available local labour is not trained, engaging them would cause mango wastage and result in monetary losses. Therefore, this issue is more of contractors than of orchard owners.

Labour from Punjab arrives in groups of 40-50 people. Depending on the size of an orchard, multiple teams work together, switching from one farm to another if need be. They stay at farms and leave once the season is finished, awaiting the arrival of kinnow season in Punjab.

“There is no rocket science involved which would prevent local labour from learning to pluck or pack mangoes. Nobody thought of departing from conventional practice before because there was no reason for it,” remarks Sindh Abadgar Board vice president Mahmood Nawaz Shah, who is also an owner of mango orchards and an exporter. To quote a medium-sized mango grower Nadeem Shah, Punjab’s labour is cheap as well as trained.

The Sindh government remained worried till all the men from Tableeghi Jamaat – who became virus carriers in the province in March – recovered and were repatriated home. The government’s efforts to ensure safe transportation was praised. Given its lockdown policy, it is unlikely that the Murad Shah-led government will have two different standards relating to the same emergency.

While things are challenging this year, it is an opportunity to engage local labour so that they get trained and there is less reliance on workers from another province next season. It would not be difficult for the locals to learn the art of sorting and plucking since they work in the fields all year round. Is saving mangoes more important than saving lives?

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556252/its-a-season-of-mangoes-and-covid-19>

AGRICULTURAL HARDSHIP UNDER LOCKDOWN

Amjad Mahmood Updated May 11, 2020

THE agriculture sector is facing one of its biggest crises. On one hand, erratic weather and the resultant untimely heavy rains and hailstorms, coupled with the locust attack, are making it hard for farmers to sleep at night. On the other hand, the

lockdown since mid-March has created many challenges and negatively impacted the rural population in general and small farm holders in particular.

The prolonged shutdown across the country has not only reduced on-farms activities but also disturbed the transport and sale of crops, vegetables and fruits, as well as the purchase of farm inputs.

Livestock, the most important sub-sector which contributes around 60 per cent of agriculture's share to GDP, is the major victim of the Covid-19 outbreak. To meet their day-to-day expenses, small farmers rear milch cattle and sell the milk. Closure of tea-stalls, sweets shops and the reduced timing for milk shops under the lockdown's standard operating procedures (SOPs) shrank demand for this highly perishable commodity and thus cut its rates.

Salahuddin, a smallholder farmer from Narang Mandi town near Lahore, says he gets 72 litres of milk from his nine buffaloes. Before the lockdown, the milkman would give him Rs80 per litre but now is not willing to buy at even Rs50 per litre citing hurdles in the onward sale because of virus issues. Likewise, owner of a known sweet shop in Mian Channu (Khanewal) has his own dairy farm but since he is disallowed to open his business because of the lockdown, he is forced to sell milk at Rs40 per litre in the town, says Pakistan Kissan Ittehad general secretary Mian Umair, who belongs to the area.

Some dairy farmers are turning towards value addition in the form of mozzarella cheese and ghee to prolong milk's shelf life rather than sell it at throwaway prices

Initially suffering at the hands of the milkman, Mr Salahuddin is now trying to find a solution through value addition: he is preparing (mozzarella quality) cheese and trying to sell it online. Even if he doesn't manage to find buyers, this will enhance the shelf life of the milk. Similarly, some dairy farmers are making desi ghee out of milk instead of selling the commodity at throwaway prices.

Closure of hotels and the ban on weddings and parties is also hurting the once thriving poultry sector. Vegetables are also being sold at low rates in the wholesale market though end consumers are not benefitting from the low prices as the middlemen are making a killer profit.

"The first month of the lockdown was particularly difficult for farmers as delinked from the markets, they had to sell their dairy and farm products at throwaway prices," says Farooq Tariq, general secretary of Pakistan Kissan Rabita Committee, a representative of smallholder farmers. "Those engaged in producing horticulture, floriculture and dairy farming were shattered with the losses for being forced to market their commodities at whatever rate offered in the local bazaar."

Hanf Hanjra, a horticulturist from Sargodha, says previously he earned a good living during the wedding and Ramazan seasons by dispatching his produce to big markets like Lahore and Gujranwala. "However, this time I'm hardly able to meet my expenses because I'm forced to sell my farm produce in the local market at much lower rates as either transport to far-off markets is not available or its charges are unaffordable." He claims he could not once cover transport charges even for the Sargodha market where his four maunds (around 160kg) of coriander was sold for just Rs70 in wholesale.

Unfortunately, the harvesting season of wheat, politically the most important crop, has also fallen in this time of social distancing. The already scarce manual labour has been further reduced because of mobility issues in the wake of the pandemic. And this gap in demand and supply has pushed up wages of available farmworkers.

"Labour is costlier this year as workers face problems crossing police check-posts erected to curtail the movement of people," says Mian Umair. Previously, he would pay 160kg per acre of wheat to a worker for reaping his crop and now this rate has gone up to 210kg per acre. Facing issues trying to convince the mostly illiterate labour force to observe social

distancing rules, he says he had to hire manpower from as far as Kasur district, more than 200km away from Mian Channu.

The farming sector was also hit because of difficulties in obtaining inputs and the shutdown of agriculture-engineering and allied industries. Though the government has permitted auto workshops to function when the wheat harvesting season sets in, the decision to allow shops of lath machines, spare parts, etc came a bit late in the day and farmers could not get their tractors, tube-wells and allied machines repaired in time. There were also difficulties in procuring medicine for cattle, bemoans Mr Salah.

Mr Tariq regrets that small farmers, one of the hardest-hit class by the lockdown, are not being considered for compensation by the government. He fears that this will lead to the compounding of rural poverty, disabling particularly the landless farmers from the purchase of seed and other farm inputs for the next crop.

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QCCI BACKS FLOUR MILLERS' DEMAND

CORRESPONDENT May 11, 2020

QUETTA. Quetta Chamber of Commerce and Industry backed Pakistan Flour Mills Association's demand of lifting inter-district ban on the transportation of wheat in the name of coronavirus lockdown. "Section 144 is imposed across Balochistan to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

However, the ban on inter-district transportation on wheat could cause food shortage in the province," said QCCI Senior Vice President Badaruddin Kakar in a statement issued on Saturday. Kakar accused the provincial government and food department of deliberately causing wheat turmoil in Balochistan to ruin the provincial flour mill industry.

"Naseerabad, Jhal Magsi and Jaffar districts fulfill wheat requirements of other districts of the province. Despite the fact, Balochistan government making any policy and strategy," said the QCCI senior vice president in the statement.

He alleged the provincial government for attempting to create wheat shortage to increase flour prices across the province. Criticising wheat procurement policy of the government, Kakar said, "Balochistan produces 80 to 90 million sacks of wheat in a year but the government announced to procure only one million sacks which will ruin the flour mills business in the province.

https://epaper.tribune.com.pk/DisplayDetails.aspx?ENI_ID=11202005110209&EN_ID=11202005110063&EMID=11202005110030

PAKISTAN'S SUGAR POLICY NEEDS REFORMS

By HARI LOHANO Published: May 11, 2020

KARACHI: In the midst of the coronavirus crisis, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government has released the probe commission report on the misuse of sugar and wheat subsidies in the country.

The report shows the power and influence of sugar barons in relation to the country's policy-making. Most of the names mentioned in the report are close associates of the PM, the PTI and the ministers in the government.

PM Imran deserves much credit for the release of the report. He has promised to take decisive action after the probe commission submits its final recommendations.

Findings of the report raise crucial questions about the government's sugar policy and the transparency of its economic policy. How does the sugar policy work? How sugar subsidy benefits only the sugar industry?

Sugarcane is a high-value, rich farmer's crop due its special characteristics. Its per-acre expenses are much higher than any other cash crop.

The time from planting to harvesting is longer. Its marketing chain, from buying seed to arranging tractor trollies for transporting it to sugar mills, negotiating price and finally getting payment, involves very lengthy processes. This favours the rich and better-off farmers as against the cash-starved small landowners.

Pakistan is among the top 10 sugarcane producing countries in the world, with plantations over a million hectares. Sugarcane production accounts for nearly two-thirds of the area in Punjab and a quarter in Sindh.

It uses more of the subsidised agricultural inputs, especially fertiliser and water, than any other crop in the economy. In a highly water-stressed country like Pakistan, sugarcane uses a much higher quantity of water than any other crop.

Between 2013-14 and 2017-18, according to the Economic Survey of Pakistan, the production of sugarcane increased by an impressive 24%, from 67 to 83 million tonnes.

During this period, the area where sugarcane was cultivated increased by 14% from 1.17 to 1.34 million hectares. The average yield per hectare, rising from 57 to 62 tonnes, shows an increase of only 8%.

The area under sugarcane cultivation in Pakistan is the fifth largest in the world after Brazil, India, China and Thailand. Its per-hectare yield, however, is much lower than the other major producers.

Its yield of 62 tonnes per hectare in 2018 was well below the world average of 73 tonnes and even below India's yield of 80 tonnes.

Figures for last year's crop (2018-19), compared with the average performance of crops in the previous five years, showed a decline of 9% in sugarcane cultivation and 6% in production. This decline is mainly attributed to late payments to farmers, shortage of water and an uncertain political environment during the 2018 election.

As in production, Pakistan is among the top 10 countries in consumption of sugar in the world and the biggest consumer of sugar in South Asia. Consumption of sugar is over 25 kg per person per year in Pakistan. In India, it is 20 kg and in China 11 kg.

Pakistan has 89 sugar mills, a much higher number than needed for domestic requirement. Some of these are located in regions where they are economically unviable and environmentally unsuitable.

Most of these mills are owned by very influential and powerful families. They belong to the governing party, the main opposition parties and the families of former generals.

At the time of Independence in 1947, there were only two sugar mills in the country. Until 1970, there were only four.

The mushroom growth of the mills was mainly during General Zia's period of office (1977-1988), when state patronage was provided to create a new business and political class to counter political opposition to his dictatorial rule. Since then, all the major political parties have followed this path and expanded it.

This growth of the sugar industry has had a very adverse effect on the country's other climatically suitable cash crop, cotton, which has been the backbone of the agriculture sector and a major source of foreign currency reserves for the country.

Between 2013-14 and 2017-18, the area under cotton cultivation declined by 4% and its production by 6%. More strikingly, when 2018-19 is compared with the average performance of the crop in the previous five years, its cultivation area has declined by 17% and production fell by two million bales or 20%.

The pricing policy for sugarcane and sugar is based on government intervention in the market through huge public subsidies, direct and indirect, at various levels of production and sale of the commodity.

At the time of harvesting the crop, the government announces a guaranteed minimum price for sugarcane, to encourage farmers to increase the area under cultivation. The government even decides about the movement of the crop – to ensure that sugar mill owners receive plenty of the produce to keep their business viable.

To protect the sugar industry further, the government imposes higher tariffs on sugar imports to “stabilise” prices in the domestic market. In general, the domestic price for sugar remains much higher than the average world price.

In addition, the government provides an export subsidy on sugar in the name of increasing foreign currency reserves.

The government's decision in September 2018 to allow export of sugar, despite early indications of low production in the country, was a continuation of past public policy to protect the industry.

Pakistan exported 0.4 million tonnes of sugar in 2016-17 and 1.6 million tonnes in 2017-18. Moreover, in 2017, during the period of Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) government, the sugar export quota was increased from 0.5 to 2 million tonnes.

There are two prices for refined sugar in the domestic market. One is the ex-mill price, which is the wholesale price at which the mill sells its product to traders and shopkeepers. The other is the retail price of sugar sold to customers at local corner shops and supermarkets – the price paid by common consumers.

The decision to export the commodity caused a hike in both these prices. The ex-mill price increased from Rs52 to Rs54 per kg in January 2019. The retail price, however, increased from Rs56 to Rs59, a rise of 6%.

With the increasing exports, prices increased regularly for domestic consumers. Even after the ban on sugar exports in February, prices remain on the higher side.

Between December 2019 and March 2020, the ex-mill price for sugar increased by 39% to Rs72. In the same period, the retail price increased by 33% to Rs80.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s April 2020 report also mentions that wholesale prices for sugar in Pakistan were over 50% higher in March than the international prices.

The sugar industry has benefitted enormously from the government's policy. In addition to the export subsidy of Rs3 billion by the Punjab government, the sugar mill owners have received extra profit to the extent of Rs85 billion – Rs5.7 billion per month from January 2019 to the end of March 2020.

The above discussion demonstrates that the government's sugar policy distorts the local market. This harms poor the most and inflicts huge costs on the domestic economy. The only beneficiary is the influential and powerful sugar industry.

At the time of pandemic and huge risks to economy, the government should refrain from intervening in the sugar market and consider reforms in the industry through parliamentary procedures and democratic practices.

In this hour of economic crisis, the government should focus more on the protection of poor and welfare of society through the provision of public goods like healthcare and strengthen the social safety nets.

The writer is a PhD from the UK and writes for The Guardian as well

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2218472/2-pakistans-sugar-policy-needs-reforms/>

HAILSTORM DAMAGES WHEAT CROP, ORCHARDS IN BAJAUR

The Newspaper's Correspondent Updated May 12, 2020

KHAR: Rain coupled with hailstorm damaged standing wheat crop, vegetables and orchards in Mamond tehsil of Bajaur tribal district, residents and officials said on Monday.

They said that hailstorm accompanied by rain started just after Iftari and lasted for about one hour.

They said that Dabar, Badan, Shah Goo, Shahi Thangi, Mokha, Kalpanim Kaga, Sewai and other hilly areas were the worst affected.

Local residents told this correspondent that hailstones were very large in size, severely damaging the standing crop of wheat, vegetables and orchards in the region.

They said that the growers were expecting good harvest of wheat crop this year, but hailstones largely damaged it.

District agriculture officer Ziaul Islam Dawar told Dawn that the hailstorm caused extensive damage to wheat crop and vegetables in Mamond tehsil.

Published in Dawn, May 12th, 2020

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556473/hailstorm-damages-wheat-crop-orchards-in-bajaur>

33,000 TONS OF WHEAT RECOVERED DURING RAIDS: MINISTER

By RECORDER REPORT on May 12, 2020

The Punjab Food Department has so far recovered 33,130 tons of stored wheat by raiding 436 storage places in different districts of the province.

The recovered wheat has been seized and action is being taken against the accused under the law, said Senior Minister Punjab Abdul Aleem Khan here on Monday.

The minister said that strict action was being taken against wheat stockpiling across the province and crackdown was being carried out indiscriminately against the elements involved in this heinous crime.

In a briefing session of the food department, Aleem Khan said that for the last two weeks, strict checks were being carried out on the land and river routes of Punjab where smuggling of wheat had been curtailed with the help of the intelligence agencies and Rangers.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/12/596146/three-3000-tons-of-wheat-recovered-during-raids-minister/>

KHARIF SEASON PADDY TO BE SOWN OVER 4.618M ACRES IN PUNJAB

RECORDER REPORT May 12, 2020

SIALKOT: More than 4.618 million acres of land would be brought under paddy crop during Kharif season in various rice growing areas of the Punjab.

Sources in Agriculture department told Business Recorder on Monday that the department had chalked out a well-knitted training programme to create awareness among the growers about the use of recommended seed and proper use of fertilizer to attain the fixed target in Punjab.

In this regard, the department deputed special training teams which were visiting various villages for providing proper guidance and assistance about the use of inputs, nursery sowing and transfer of plants into fields to the rice growers in the Punjab.

In Sialkot district, paddy will be cultivated on 317030 acres of land in Sialkot, Daska, Pasrur and Sambrial tehsils during Kharif season. The paddy would be sown on 91083 acres in Sialkot, 78053 acres in Daska, 103098 acres in Pasrur and 44796 acres in Sambrial tehsils of Sialkot district. Local agriculture department had initiated farmers training programme in 1442 villages of Sialkot, Daska, Pasrur and Sambrial tehsils of Sialkot district. Special training teams were busy to empower rice growers for enhancing per acre yield, sowing of paddy nurseries, utilization of irrigation water, pesticides and fertilizer as well as about the different varieties of paddy in Sialkot district, the sources added.

Some progressive farmers were adopting modern technology for raising rice nursery by automatic machine in plastic trays at local agriculture farm and ready for transplanting by 'Rice Trans Planter' in Bajwat area of Sialkot.

<https://epaper.brecorder.com/2020/05/12/10-page/836745-news.html>

TRADING ACTIVITIES RESUME ON COTTON MARKET

By RECORDER REPORT on May 12, 2020

Trading activities resume on the cotton market on Monday after the closure of more than one and a half months due to the coronavirus lockdown.

Market sources said that traders are hopeful that situation will be improved gradually after the softening of the lockdown by the government.

Cotton analyst Naseem Usman told that both federal and provincial governments should take steps to save the cotton crop from the locust attack. The recent report of Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations warned of a potentially serious food security crisis this year in several regional countries, including Pakistan, due to locust attacks.

It is expected that Pakistan's Rabi and Kharif crops will be badly affected by locust attack. According to the estimates Pakistan's economy has to bear the loss of Rs 669 billion due to the locust attack during the current year.

Naseem Usman said that Spot Rate Committee of Karachi Cotton Association has stabled the spot rate at Rs 8600 per maund. The rate of cotton in Sindh and Punjab is in between Rs 7000 to Rs 8600 per maund. The rate of polyester fiber was decreased by Rs 3 per kg and was available at Rs 157 per kg.

<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/12/596129/trading-activities-resume-on-cotton-market/>

K-P CHALKS OUT STRATEGY TO BATTLE LOCUSTS

By Our Correspondent Published: May 12, 2020

PESHAWAR: After crops in multiple districts were ravaged by locusts, the provincial government on Monday said that it has prepared an inclusive strategy for tackling the pests.

Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (K-P) Minister for Agriculture and Livestock, Mohibullah Khan on Monday presided over a meeting to review the agriculture department's response to battling swarms of locusts.

Agriculture Secretary Israr Khan, Agriculture Extension Director-General Abid Kamal and other senior officials attended the meeting.

The provincial agriculture minister was briefed on the presence of locusts and measures to control it.

The minister was told that teams have been formed at the district level where locust swarms are present.

At least 25,833 acres of land has been sprayed with insecticides in 15 districts of the province to control the locusts, the minister was told.

To further control the roving swarms of locusts, Mohibullah was told that aerial spray will also be conducted.

The locusts entered K-P through Sherani, Mosakhel and Zhobs districts of Balochistan on January 25 this year and since then have spread to several southern districts of the province.

As a result, the provincial government had been forced to impose an emergency in all locust-hit districts of K-P on January 28. The emergency was later extended to other districts of the province which were affected by locusts.

Published in The Express Tribune, May 12th, 2020.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2219416/1-k-p-chalks-strategy-battle-locusts/>

CS ORDERS GOVT DEPTS TO COLLABORATE TO COMBAT LOCUSTS

By APP Published: May 12, 2020

LAHORE: Punjab Chief Secretary Jawwad Rafique Malik on Monday directed the departments concerned to work collectively on scientific lines to combat locust. "These departments include Provincial Disaster Management Authority (PDMA), Agriculture, Livestock and Forest."

He expressed these views while presiding over a meeting to review steps to control locust in the province. Senior Member Board of Revenue (SMBR) Babar Hayat Tarar, Agriculture secretary, PDMA director general and senior army officers attended the meeting.

The SMBR told the meeting that 150 vehicles and 260 motorcycle were being used for spray in locust-affected areas and so far 114,406 hectares of land had been covered.

As many as 760 solo power were also being utilized for carrying out spray, he added. He further said that a working group headed by SMBR and comprising secretaries of different departments including Finance, Agriculture, Livestock and Forest was supervising the situation.

Similarly, a core committee consisting of Agriculture DG, PDMA DG, representatives of army and Cholistan Development Authority was working against the pest.

Published in The Express Tribune, May 12th, 2020.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2219454/1-cs-orders-govt-depts-collaborate-combat-locusts/>

ECC READY TO APPROVE FARM PACKAGE

By Zafar Bhutta Published: May 12, 2020

ISLAMABAD: The Economic Coordination Committee (ECC), which is scheduled to meet on Wednesday, is set to approve a Rs56-billion bailout package for the agriculture sector amid the growing impact of Covid-19 pandemic.

The government has already announced a stimulus package of over Rs1.2 trillion to cushion the impact of Covid-19. Out of this, Rs100 billion has been earmarked for giving relief to small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and the agriculture sector.

The Ministry of National Food Security and Research has prepared a package of incentives for farmers in various sub-sectors of the agriculture sector to help them to cope with the impact of Covid-19. The ministry has submitted its proposals for ECC's consideration.

The food security ministry has proposed a subsidy of Rs925 per bag of di-ammonium phosphate (DAP) and other phosphoric fertilisers and Rs243 per bag of urea and other nitrogen fertilisers. Total subsidy cost will be Rs37 billion.

Agrarian dilemma: Is the smart subsidy really smart for Pakistani farmers?

The subsidy scheme will be implemented by the provinces and funds will be disbursed through the scratch card scheme, already being implemented by Punjab. The subsidy on fertilisers has been proposed for the Kharif crop (April-October).

At present, the government gives subsidy to fertiliser manufacturers on gas supply that is said to be not fully passed on to consumers. This time, the government has decided to give a direct subsidy to the farmers.

Farmers have been facing high-interest rates of up to 18.4% on bank loans. This has been a major problem that has caused losses to them over the past few years as they cannot add adequate inputs to crops.

Now, the government has decided to reduce the mark-up on loans. However, the proposed rate of interest is still high that the farmers may not be able to afford.

At present, the mark-up on agricultural loans provided by Zarai Taraqati Bank Limited is 18.4%. A reduction to 10% has been proposed for 2020 for ECC's approval. The mark-up subsidy will require Rs8.8 billion.

A subsidy of Rs150 per kg of cottonseed has been recommended for the Kharif 2020 crop season in Punjab and Sindh. This subsidy will require an amount of Rs2.3 billion.

Another subsidy of Rs300 per bag of pesticides, meant for combating white fly, has been proposed. The subsidy will cover five million acres in Punjab and Sindh, which is around 80% of the cotton area. The total cost of the subsidy will be Rs6 billion.

The food security ministry has proposed 5% sales tax subsidy on locally manufactured tractors for one year. The total cost of the subsidy will be Rs2.5 billion. Sources said the finance ministry had endorsed the subsidy for the agriculture sector.

Published in The Express Tribune, May 12th, 2020.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2219479/2-ecc-ready-approve-farm-package/>

CHICKEN PRICES SHOOT UP

Aamir Shafaat Khan May 13, 2020

KARACHI: Retailers have raised the prices of chicken beyond the reach of many people as the live bird is selling at Rs230-240 per kg and meat at Rs350-400 per kg, showing an increase of Rs70-80 a kilo over the past few days.

Surprisingly, the official rate of live bird and its meat is Rs138 and Rs214 per kg but shopkeepers have neither displayed the price list, nor are they selling the bird at the control rate.

Poultry retailers are demanding Rs600 for boneless chicken as compared to Rs500 per kg.

Poultry traders say that prices usually crash on low demand and soar on high demand, but here they link the price hike to a short supply of birds from farms.

General secretary of the Sindh Poultry Wholesalers and Retailers Association Kamal Akhtar Siddiqui said in last week of March, poultry industry had warned consumers regarding price hike in coming months because farmers were not putting day-old chicks at their farms owing to massive decline in sale due to closure of wedding halls, restaurants, hotels, barbecues, etc, during the lockdown which was imposed in third week of March to control spread of coronavirus.

He said wholesale price of live bird had risen to Rs210 from Rs140 and meat to Rs367 from Rs245 per kg.

“Despite price hike, poultry is still cheaper when compared with veal meat prices of Rs600-700 per kg (with and without bones) and mutton at Rs1,200 per kg,” he said adding that even good quality fish was selling at Rs700 per kg.

The government had allowed online sale of food during limited hours slightly offsetting the negative impact of low chicken sale to some extent.

A number of people prefer to make chicken-related dishes at home rather than taking risk of ordering online food in view of lingering coronavirus threat.

Consumers are now paying the price of huge losses of poultry sector’s declining sales in March and April and the government’s price control machinery does not exist to rescue consumers, some observers said.

The government has remained focused towards dealing with the opening of different trades and finalising standard operating procedures (SOPs) for various industries since the start of lockdown.

However, with or without price list, stakeholders had continued to challenge the government's writ in selling products on their own terms.

There is literally no fear among shopkeepers, wholesalers and product manufacturers to face any strict action like heavy fines or imprisonment against price hike, the observers added.

The Pakistan Poultry Association (PPA) in last week of March said that hatcheries had stopped setting eggs for chick production amid depressed sales.

Egg layers had also been culled, which was already showing signs of short supply of eggs.

Broiler breeders, which were consuming feed, had been sold at throwaway prices for meat.

From the above situation, birds supply in the markets would remain in short supply in coming months.

Published in Dawn, May 13th, 2020

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556656/chicken-prices-shoot-up>

RAHU REITERATES NEED FOR CENTRE'S HELP TO KEEP LOCUSTS AT BAY

The Newspaper's Staff Correspondent May 13, 2020

HYDERABAD: Sindh Minister for Agriculture Ismail Rahu has apprehended that locusts currently present in many districts of the province could cause heavy damage to the agriculture sector if not eliminated before rainfall.

"It's the most dangerous enemy we are faced with after Covid-19," he remarked while chairing a meeting of agriculture extension officials and later addressing a press conference at Shahbaz Hall here on Tuesday.

Mr Rahu was of the view that locusts would inflict a heavy loss to agricultural produce in Sindh and Punjab in the next few months as monsoon was approaching. The loss would ultimately cause food insecurity on a large scale, he added.

"It's a major issue as the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and other international forums have already warned that locusts could attack Pakistan 10 times this year," the minister said.

He told the meeting that the federal government should help Sindh carry out aerial spray to eliminate locusts' swarms that had already devoured standing crops and green patches in many districts and were a potential threat to remaining agricultural fields in Sindh.

He noted that the swarms were constantly attacking certain districts over the past two months.

He recalled that the federal government had declared a 'national emergency' in January this year and prepared a national action plan to deal with the menace in three phases. "The first phase is near completion but no significant success has been achieved so far," he pointed out, and regretted that no effective action was being taken while only meetings after meetings on the issue were being held.

The minister quoted surveys, conducted by some international organisations, suggesting that 300,000 square kilometre area of Pakistan could come under locust attack. The areas identified in the surveys were 50pc of Balochistan, 35pc of

Sindh and 15pc of Punjab. “This means that 100,000sq-km area is vulnerable and 50,000sq-km area has already come under attack or threatened by the swarms existing in Sindh,” he said.

He, however, noted that this time, locusts swarms in Sindh appeared to be in transition and that was why they did not cause a huge loss to crops but during and after rainfall, they would definitely pose a serious threat to farmlands in the province. “The swarms are flying towards India but very likely to return in the rainy season,” he said, adding that myriads of swarms did exist in Iran as well and could enter Pakistan via Balochistan.

“We apprehend a three- or four-pronged invasion by locusts from the desert areas of Sindh targeting seven districts and this would be an alarming situation,” he said.

Mr Rahu called for effective and coordinated joint efforts by his department, federal plant protection department, National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) and other relevant departments to face the challenge. He noted that the army also stood by the Sindh government in this exercise.

Explaining Sindh’s position in this context, the minister said aerial spray was the most effective method but there was only one aircraft without a pilot made available to the provincial government against the actual requirement of six each with a pilot. He said the available aircraft was meant for aerial spray in Sukkur district while five other ones were required for such operations in three other districts — Hyderabad, Mirpur-khas and Shaheed Benazirabad. Also, against the requirement of 25 sprayer-mounted vehicles, only five were made available to Sindh, he added.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556649/rahu-reiterates-need-for-centres-help-to-keep-locusts-at-bay>

OTTON PRODUCTION SLIDE

By NUZHAT NAZAR on May 13, 2020

The Federal Cabinet on Tuesday decided that the support price of cotton should be fixed after thorough consultations with all the stakeholders in order to encourage farmers to sow more and more cotton as its cultivation has been woefully declining.

Prime minister Imran Khan, who chaired the cabinet's meeting, was in favour of giving subsidies on cotton seed and fertilizer, so that poor growers could benefit.

The cabinet also decided to amend laws on appointment of heads of various government institutions and autonomous bodies in the country. It also reviewed the audit reports relating to alleged embezzlement in the affairs of Karachi Port Trust (KPT).

After the federal cabinet meeting, Information Minister Senator Shibli Faraz, while giving a news briefing, said that a seven-point agenda was discussed in the cabinet meeting.

The information minister said a committee has been constituted to frame a law with regard to appointment of heads for government entities.

He said the committee will work under the supervision of Advisor for Institutional Reforms Dr Ishrat Hussain, which will present its recommendations within a week.

He said Minister for Narcotics Control Azam Khan Swati presented 39 proposals to the prime minister on electoral reforms, which the prime minister appreciated.

The information minister said the decisions of the Cabinet Committee on Energy were ratified in the meeting, while the prime minister directed to expedite the reforms in the energy sector.

Shibli Faraz also said that the PTI is the only party, which has introduced reforms in the electoral process, while reforms in the energy sector are the government's priority.

The information minister said the cabinet approved the names of the National Commission for the Status of Women but the members would be decided by the prime minister.

He said that the cabinet had approved the application of Pakistan Essential Services Act, 1952, on all employees of the National Institutional Facilitation Technology and the approval had been given for six months.

Shibli Faraz also said that the cabinet approved the appointment of member National Accounts and member Census in the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, and also approved the audit to rectify the irregularities in the affairs of the Karachi Port Trust (KPT).

The cabinet approved the names of the members of the National Commission for Status of Women and National Bureau of Statistics.

It also approved decisions taken by the Cabinet's Committee on Energy and Economic Coordination Committee.

The information minister said the cabinet reviewed matters pertaining to audit survey regarding embezzlement in Karachi Port Trust.

Senator Shibli Faraz said Prime Minister Imran Khan also sought a report regarding illegal and unlawful appointments in 12 different ministries within one week.

Talking about the coronavirus challenge, the minister said no country in the world can afford continuous lockdown, and a decision regarding ease in countrywide lockdown was taken in view of difficulties being faced by poor labour class.

He said the government has limited resources and infrastructure, and continuous lockdown was not possible under the prevailing conditions.

The minister urged the citizens and members of the civil society to adopt all necessary precautionary measures, follow guidelines and the SOPs, and support government in its endeavors to contain the pandemic.

APP adds: The PM said all the lacunas in the election laws would be addressed so that the people's trust in the election process was restored and nobody could raise a finger on the transparency of election. A transparent and credible electoral process was the foundation of democracy and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) was the only party which had taken serious efforts and practical steps for electoral reforms.

Expressing the government's commitment, the prime minister directed to intensify efforts so that electoral reforms process should be completed as soon as possible.

Shibli Faraz said the cabinet discussed the issue of unlawful appointments made in various ministries during the previous governments. It transpired that appointments without any cabinet approval were made in 12 ministries. Expressing his

serious concern, the prime minister directed all the ministries to share details in next cabinet meeting so that action could be taken on the issue.

Senator Shibli Faraz said the cabinet also approved the names of the members of National Commission on the Status of Women, including Shaista Bukhari from Punjab, Habiba Hassan from Sindh, Rubina Naz Advocate from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Fatima Iqbal from Balochistan, Madhiha Sultana from AJK, Sosan Aziz from Gilgit Baltistan and Asia Azeem from the Federal Capital.

The minister said the PM directed steps for provision of energy to the consumers at affordable rates and reduction of the circular debt. He also directed the minister for energy to complete the process of reformation in various departments of the ministry with a time line.

He said Minister for Planning and Development Asad Umar gave a briefing on the steps being taken to control the coronavirus in the country and presented the report on the situation after relaxation in the lockdown.

Imran Khan remarked that activities in the construction and other sectors had even been allowed by the developed countries keeping in view the ground realities. Keeping the economy afloat and balancing security measures was imperative, he added.

Shibli Faraz it was observed that generally the people did not adopt precautionary measures and the cabinet appealed to them to strictly follow the standard operating procedures (SOPs) as the country could not afford a surge in the coronavirus cases.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/13/596489/country-on-the-brink-of-a-wheat-crisis-pbif-chief/>

PPA OPPOSES PUNJAB GOVT'S BID TO CONTROL POULTRY PRICES

By RECORDER REPORT on May 13, 2020

Pakistan Poultry Association (Northern Region) has urged the Punjab government to allow the free-market mechanism to regulate demand and supply instead of intervening in market prices.

PPA (Northern Region) Vice Chairman Chaudhry Muhammad Fargham while talking to media persons here on Tuesday said the industry was very hurt and depressed by the Punjab government's action of controlling the prices of live chicken and meat. He claimed that the commissioner animal husbandry in the ministry of national food security had submitted cost of production to the Chief Justice of Peshawar High Court as far back as in March 2012 at Rs 31.27 for day old chicks and Rs 132.50/kg for broilers. The current costs are around Rs 45 for day old chick and Rs 160 for broilers. As per calculation of Director PRI Rawalpindi, the cost of production is Rs.145 per kg live.

The association kept the government fully abreast of the situation through different means and said it would lead to an acute shortage of poultry products as the losses would result in a reduction in production and that prices will shoot up. "We had advised the government that in the event of an increase in price, supply would partially but gradually increase to some extent. We had strongly advised the government not to intervene in free-market mechanism but the governments paid no heed," he added.

He said now the market is allowing surviving farmers to recover their losses, the administration is arresting the sellers of chicken meat and forcing them to sell meat at Rs 260/Kg. Such actions would lead to long term closure of poultry farms,

which would lead to not only a tremendous increase in chicken meat prices but also mutton, beef and pulses as well, he warned.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/13/596558/govt-committed-to-fulfill-commitments-under-27th-intl-conventions-tweets-pm/>

LOCUST ATTACKS COULD INCREASE TEN TIMES THIS YEAR, FEARS MINISTER

By RECORDER REPORT on May 13, 2020

Sindh Minister for Agriculture Mohammed Ismail Rahu has said that according to the agriculture experts of the world the swarms of locust attacks could be increased ten times more than those of the last year. He informed that the season of two main crops of cotton and rice was about to start as well as monsoon season was going to start soon which was also the breeding season for locusts as well therefore three months of June, July and August were important in this regard.

This he said while presiding over a meeting about preventive measures for Locust attacks at Agriculture Extension Office, Shahbaz Building, Hyderabad on Tuesday.

The minister further said that swarms of locusts were attacking in Sindh like last year and this danger could not be avoided. He directed the officers concerned for stopping the breeding of locusts in deserted areas of Sindh which according to him could be effective. He said that all resources would be utilized for the elimination of locusts. He asked the officers concerned to take this task as challenge and utilize their expertise and experience to eliminate locusts and save standing crops. He underlined the need for focusing Mirpurkhas, Sukkur and Shaheed Benazirabad divisions situated near to Thar Desert which was the breeding area of locusts.

He said that Sindh Agriculture Department had remained busy for elimination of locusts for one year. Rahu also directed the officers concerned to resolve the problems of growers.

Director General Agriculture Hidayatullah Chajro briefed the meeting about preventive measures for locusts.

The participants of the meeting also gave suggestions for the prevention of locusts. Director Agriculture Shaukat Hussain Mastoi informed the meeting about the present situation of Subzi Mandi and other related issues.

Later Talking to media men, the minister said that the locusts had been present in Sindh for one year and couple of days earlier locusts attacked on crops in different parts of Hyderabad Division. He said that the Sindh government was continuously trying hard to prevent locusts. He informed that the different agriculture institutes of the world issued warning of locusts attacks in our region. He said that after Coronavirus the locusts were the biggest problem for Pakistan, the situation would be worsened in coming days, as locusts from Iran and India could attack in our country, he added. He informed that 57 teams were working for preventing locust attacks and now 41 more teams had been added for this purpose. He said that we were trying to make teams ready at taluka level to spray at any time and added that a helpline number had also been given to growers to inform about locusts' attack. Replying a question, he said that there was no conflict of Sindh with the federal government, we just demanded to federal Plant Protection Department for aerial spray.

He said that losses to crops were being estimated and soon details would be issued.

To a question, he said that due to Covid-19 the problems were being faced on wheat procurement but the Sindh government would achieve its target of wheat procurement. Replying another question, he said that due to Coronavirus, the export of mangoes would be affected.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/13/596455/locust-attacks-could-increase-ten-times-this-year-fears-minister/>

72 PERCENT OF WHEAT PROCUREMENT TARGET COMPLETED, CLAIMS MINISTER

By RECORDER REPORT on May 13, 2020

Punjab has achieved 72 percent of the 4.5 million tons of wheat procurement target set for the current year while 92 percent of 'baardana' (gunny bags) have been distributed among the farmers.

Food Minister Abdul Aleem Khan said this while replying to the questions of food department during the current session of Punjab Assembly. He said a coordinated policy has been implemented for the procurement of wheat in Punjab which has tried to bring direct benefits to common farmers. He also said that the government has ensured uninterrupted supply of "baardana" to the farmers all over the province. He said he himself is keeping an eye on wheat procurement drive and making on the spot checking of all the procedure and claimed no complaint has been received in this regard.

The Minister said that Punjab has set a target of purchasing 4.5 million metric tonnes of wheat which will be completed ahead of time. He said the Punjab government would also meet the wheat requirement of KPK by purchasing additional wheat while another 5 lakh metric tonnes is also under consideration for an extraordinary situation.

Aleem Khan assured that people of Punjab will not be facing the shortage of food grains. He claimed that the food department is fulfilling its responsibilities and all necessary steps are being taken to meet the requirements. He also answered various supplementary questions of the food department and informed the session about the steps taken by it for the betterment of this sector.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/13/596449/seven-2-percent-of-wheat-procurement-target-completed-claims-minister/>

90% BAGS FOR COLLECTING WHEAT DISTRIBUTED

By Our Correspondent Published: May 13, 2020

LAHORE: Provincial Senior Minister Abdul Aleem Khan has said that a coordinated policy has been implemented for the procurement of wheat in Punjab while trying to bring direct benefits to the farmers.

Replying to lawmakers' questions about the Food Department in the Punjab Assembly, he added that 72 per cent target of the procurement of wheat has been achieved in Punjab, while the distribution of 92 per cent bags to farmers has been completed for the purpose so far.

The minister said the Punjab government has ensured uninterrupted supply of sacks to the farmers all over the province this year. He told the house that he had inspected the wheat procurement drive and found no complaint on the ground.

He said Punjab has set a target of purchasing 4.5 million tonnes of wheat, which will hopefully be completed ahead of time. He said the Punjab government would also meet the wheat requirement of K-P besides. He said the additional purchase of 500,000 tonnes is also under consideration to meet an extraordinary situation.

The minister said illegal transportation of wheat in Punjab has been strictly curtailed and largescale operations have been carried out against hoarders without any discrimination.

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<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2220247/1-90-bags-collecting-wheat-distributed/>

FLOUR CRISIS FEARED AS PRICE GOES UP

Ali Hazrat Bacha May 14, 2020

PESHAWAR: The price of a 20kg wheat flour bag went up by Rs30 here on Wednesday as the local millers stopped supplies to hundreds of points selling flour in different parts of the provincial capital at subsidised rate.

Flour dealers of the main Rampura Market told Dawn that 20kg bag of mixed quality flour was sold for Rs920-Rs930 in the wholesale level against the previous rate of Rs870-Rs880 and the 20kg fine atta bag at Rs1,000.

The Bara Road wholesalers and retailers were found to have fixed the price at will.

According to the dealers, sales points were set up in different localities to provide flour to people at the controlled price of Rs808 per bag but they're closed at the moment.

They said wheat supply from Punjab had been suspended to the mills of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa leading to the closure of sales points.

Millers insist situation caused by halt to wheat supply from Punjab

The dealers said the flour price had increased in Punjab, where millers continuously demanded increase in wheat quota at the subsidised rate but the government didn't do so.

They added that the dealers of KP, too, had to purchase wheat at high price.

Meanwhile, the Pakistan Flour Mills Association, Khyber Pakht-unkhwa, has warned a halt to the grinding of wheat over the suspension of supplies at subsidised rate from the provincial government.

It also feared a severe flour crisis in the province after Eidul Fitr.

"All of our 180 flour mills are to stop the grinding within a couple of days due to ban on wheat supply from Punjab KP flour mills," association president Haji Mohammad Iqbal told Dawn.

He demanded the lifting of the ban on wheat supply from Punjab to KP to control flour price hike.

Meanwhile, the millers led by Mohammad Naeem Butt and office-bearers of the Sarhad Chamber of Commerce and Industry also held a meeting at the chamber's offices with SCCI president Engineer Maqsood Anwar Pervaiz in the chair.

They demanded of Chief Minister Mahmood Khan to intervene and ensure the restoration of wheat supply from Punjab to KP.

The millers said the government of Punjab had imposed an ‘unconstitutional’ and ‘unlawful’ ban on wheat transportation to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and that ban was a clear violation of Article 151 of the Constitution.

“Our province is deficient in wheat, so it mostly depends on Punjab to fulfil its needs,” a miller said.

He said wheat supply to local mills from the government’s godowns had come to a halt and that all mills would be closed under the prevailing circumstances as there was no other option to acquire wheat.

The millers said due to the unavailability of wheat on the market, they were unable to continue supplying flour to the markets at the subsidised price, which had led to the fear of flour shortage across the province.

“We had earlier warned the government to take up the wheat ban issue with Sindh, Punjab and federal governments but they paid no attention,” Mr Naeem Butt said.

He added that the entire responsibility rested with the provincial government.

The miller alleged that the current performance of the provincial government, especially food department, in the prevailing circumstances was very disappointing.

Mr Maqsood Pervaiz asked the government to lift the ‘inter-provincial’ ban on wheat supply from Punjab to KP to ensure the timely availability of wheat to local mills and fulfil the requirement of food commodity and avert any flour crisis in the province.

He said the economic and business activities had slowed down due to the prolonged coronavirus-induced lockdown, while the imposition of ban on the transportation of wheat and unavailability of wheat for local mills would lead to the closure of flour industry in the province.

The SCCI chief said the unavailability of wheat for KP flour mills was completely unjust and unbearable and that the ban on wheat transportation should be lifted immediately.

He urged Prime Minister Imran Khan, federal food minister and secretary and other authorities to take an immediate notice of the ‘unconstitutional’ and ‘unlawful’ inter-provincial restrictions on wheat supply and ensure the smooth availability of wheat of KP flour mills.

When contacted, food secretary Nisar Ahmad said the province had a stock of over 35,000 metric tons of wheat in its godowns but that was meant for emergency situation only.

“We regularly provide wheat quota to local mills but now Punjab has stopped supplies due to own requirements, so millers have to arrange wheat privately by themselves,” he said.

The official said the province’s mills had to depend 80 per cent on wheat from Punjab.

“KP markets have flour in sufficient quantity but wheat supply has been stopped by Punjab due to local procurement process,” he said.

The secretary said wheat harvesting had begun in KP, so millers should acquire it to operate mills until the regular supply was made from official godowns.

He said the relevant authorities were well aware of the situation.

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556928>

ECC OKAYS RS50BN FOR AGRICULTURE SECTOR

Khaleeq Kiani Updated May 14, 2020

ISLAMABAD: The government on Wednesday approved a Rs50 billion package for the agriculture sector and about Rs17bn additional funds to defence forces to foot extra fuel bills.

The decisions were taken at a meeting of the Economic Coordination Committee (ECC) of the Cabinet, presided over by Finance Adviser Dr Abdul Hafeez Shaikh, that also approved in principle a cell phone assembling policy.

The ECC was given a demand of Rs56.6bn agriculture package to provide the farmers subsidy on fertilisers, reduction in bank mark-up on agriculture loans, subsidy on cotton seed and white fly pesticides and sales tax subsidy on locally manufactured tractors as part Rs100bn earmarked for farmers and small and medium enterprises (SME) out of the Rs1,200bn coronavirus relief package.

However, Shaikh asked the food security ministry to rationalise it to Rs50bn as per its share in the overall Rs100 package announced for the SMEs and the agriculture sector.

He said the ECC had already approved a Rs50bn package for the former to provide indirect cash flow support to nearly 3.5 million people through pre-paid electricity.

Rs17bn set aside for defence forces' fuel bill

Under the agriculture package, about Rs37bn subsidy would be offered to farmers on the purchase of fertilisers. The amount would include a subsidy of Rs925 per bag on DAP and other phosphatic fertilisers and Rs243 per bag on urea and other nitrogen fertilisers.

The ECC was told that the estimated urea offtake would be around 3.04m tonnes while DAP was estimated at 0.95m tonnes for the Kharif season. The subsidy scheme will be implemented by the provinces and the amount will be disbursed through a scratch card scheme already in place in Punjab.

It was also informed that the fertiliser share in the cost of production for major crops was around 10-15 per cent and the provision of subsidy would increase their affordability to adopt the recommended level of fertiliser nutrient use and best agricultural management practices.

Similarly, under the agriculture package, a reduction in mark-up of agri loans at the total cost of Rs8.8bn, subsidy on cotton seed worth Rs2.3bn and white fly pesticides at Rs6bn were also approved.

Furthermore, the ECC called for inclusion of other banks along with Zarai Taraqati in the scheme to enhance outreach of farmers with focus on subsistence farmers with a land holding of 12.5 acres. It was suggested that since markup had been reduced by the State Bank of Pakistan, the interest rates used in the proposal could also be rationalised accordingly.

The ECC called for the implementation mechanism, especially through the scratch card system, to be monitored carefully to ensure that the actual beneficiaries of the package were genuine farmers.

It was also pointed out that since with the provision of subsidy on fertilisers, their demand might increase, the same had to be communicated to the Ministry of Industries and Production (MoIP) in time to make arrangements accordingly.

The meeting approved a proposal by the Poverty Alleviation & Social Safety Division for disbursement of the Special Relief Package for the population living along the Line of Control in a single installment of Rs12,000 for six months from January-June while from July onwards, those families will be given monthly installments of Rs2,000 each until end of December.

The ECC took up different proposals for technical supplementary grants by various divisions and approved one by the Defence Division for a supplementary grant of Rs16.6bn to meet the expenses on POL, utilities and medical stores of the Defence Services.

In addition, it okayed Rs288m for payment of salaries to the employees of Pakistan Machine Tool Factory for the period from October 2019 to June 2020 and Rs40 million to the law ministry for employee-related costs and operating expenditures of the Federal Judicial Academy.

The ECC also discussed the Mobile Device Manufacturing Policy as proposed by the MoIP with the objectives of technology acquisition and localisation of mobile devices through domestic investment, joint ventures, FDIs, creation of 200,000 direct and indirect jobs, price reduction for consumers, increase in digitisation through supporting 4G/5G technologies, development of efficient manufacturing ecosystem, exports of competitively manufactured handsets and achievement of security objectives.

It deliberated upon various components of the policy and approved in-principle with instructions to the MoIP to further fine-tune its various features and incentives for promoting localisation and research and development leading to export of mobile phones.

Lastly, the ECC gave green signal to the release of 35,000 tonnes of wheat from the Pakistan Agriculture Storage and Services Corporation to the Azad Jammu and Kashmir government at Rs1.52bn, including the cost of wheat and incidental charges, to be paid 50pc by the federal administration from the stimulus package announced to fight against Covid-19.

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DIESEL SHORTAGE, POL PRICES CUT MAY HAMPER WHEAT HARVESTING

Amjad Mahmood May 11, 2020

LAHORE: There seems to be no let-up in the miseries of the farmers as the authorities remain apathetic to the diesel shortage being faced by them in the middle of the wheat harvesting season.

Reports of unavailability of diesel in the market had started doing rounds a couple of days after downward revision of the rates of petroleum products on April 30 in line with the sharp decline in their prices in the world market.

Almost all oil marketing companies stopped placing orders with the international suppliers as soon as the Oil and Gas Regulatory Authority (Ogra) hinted at proposing a cut in oil prices.

Already suffering because of shortage of labour due to Covid-19 lockdown, wheat growers are facing another unexpected crisis amid the harvesting season in the form of unavailability of diesel to run their tractors and threshing machines. This may lead to delay in harvesting.

Farmers riding their tractor-trolleys and pick-ups carrying barrels and jerry cans can be seen queuing up at the filling stations to get diesel, particularly in Bhakkar, Layyah and Mianwali districts of Punjab. In most cases, they return empty-handed or get a few litres of diesel.

“At a time when I should have been in my lands to oversee wheat harvesting, I’m forced to line up at petrol pumps to get diesel for my tractor-run thresher,” laments Rana Haider, a farmer from Thal area in Bhakkar.

Talking to Dawn by phone, he says that he has lost his three precious days in search of diesel but failed to find the product and he is paying rent for the threshing machine without using it.

Saeed Baloch, a petrol pump owner in Mianwali, claims the oil marketing companies have introduced quota regimes since April 30 for the first time on the basis of average calculated on the yearly basis and thus are providing them one-fourth of the supplies against the demand.

The companies are also delaying the supplies contrary to their normal routines, he alleges, explaining that he would get oil supply the next day of placing the order. But, since the recent cut in prices, this gap between placement of order and supplies has widened to the minimum four days, creating a severe shortage particularly of diesel, he adds.

He wonders why the government didn’t manage the situation while the state-run Pakistan State Oil had flagged the issued in the first week of May.

An official of the PSO Lahore region alleges that the private oil marketing companies (OMCs) are not supplying petroleum products to their respective dealers and thus the whole pressure has been diverted to the PSO outlets. He says that his entity is supplying one million litres of diesel daily only in Lahore region to meet the wheat harvesting-related demand.

A petroleum dealer, Rehmat Khan Wardag, says OMCs have not placed orders for the import of petroleum products since the recent cut in oil prices. He says the OMCs suffered billions of rupees losses in the process and fears that the volatile situation in the world markets will keep them away from the business in coming weeks, which may lead to severe shortage of oil, particularly diesel, in the local market.

He has urged the government to import oil on its own without delay to fend off the hovering shortage that may plunge the sectors dependent on diesel, particularly the agriculture sector, into a severe crisis.

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FOOD OFFICIAL MANHANDLED BY TOWN COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN FOR INTERCEPTING WHEAT STOCK

Dawn Report May 11, 2020

UMERKOT: Harassment and manhandling of a food department official by Samaro town committee chairman late on Saturday evening sent a wave of anger among food officials across the town. An emergency meeting of senior food officials was held on Sunday to condemn the incident.

It was gathered that food inspector Iftikhar Arain, along with a police team, intercepted a consignment of 1,200 wheat bags of 40-kg each while it was being transported by two trucks to some other district. The action was taken as part of the

ongoing campaign against hoarding/illegal movement of wheat stocks which was causing an artificial shortage of the commodity and wheat flour in the province.

According to Mr Arain, when he impounded one truck-load of wheat and chased the other truck, Samaro town committee chairman, Rafique Ahmed Qaimkhani, who belonged to the ruling Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), along with some other persons intervened and harassed him to deter him from discharging his official duty. "Qaimkhani abused and held me hostage for some time and then slapped me when I did not agree to come to his terms," alleged Mr Arain.

He said he intended to recover more than 14,000 other wheat bags hoarded in his area of operation to prevent the stocks from being shifted to some other district/province in violation of the relevant ban imposed by the provincial government.

Escorted by a police force, the officials recovered more than 1,00,000 wheat bags and sealed off the mills.

Reacting angrily to the incident, senior food officials held a meeting under the chairmanship of Mohammed Hussain Mahar to discuss the issue. Ghulam Nabi Soomro, Iftikhar Arain and other senior officials including heads of all procurement centres in the district attended the meeting.

The meeting condemned the town committee chairman's act of hooliganism as unacceptable. It said Qaimkhani's attempt of obstructing the food official from performing his duty was unlawful. Appropriate action must be taken against him and those who accompanied him in this unlawful act, it added.

The meeting participants said no one was above the law and, as such, could not be allowed to stop any official from performing duty in line with the orders issued by government.

They resolved to stop performing their official duties pertaining to wheat procurement if action was not taken against the offenders.

SUKKUR: Raids were conducted in three flour mills in the Salehpat town as the drive against hoarders of wheat continued in Sukkur district, food officials said on Saturday.

In Jacobabad, district food controller Asghar Soomro along with Assistant Commissioner of Garhi Khero Sanaullah Bhatti carried out a raid on a rice mill in Dao Jahanpur on the orders of Deputy Commissioner Ghazanfar Ali Qadri.

NAUSHAHRO FERORE: District food controller Qareebullah Soomro said on Saturday that around 145,500 wheat bags were recovered in raids on several godowns in grain markets of Bhiriya Road, Kandiaro, Mehrabpur and Khan Wahan towns.

The raiding team found more than 20,000 wheat bags clandestinely stocked there. The stocks were seized and the rice mill was sealed, the officials said.

He told local reporters around 40,000 wheat bags were recovered in Khan Wahan, 35,000 in Mehrabpur, 11,500 in Kandiaro and 60,000 in Bhiriya Road.

All the godowns were sealed, he added.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556097/food-official-manhandled-by-town-committee-chairman-for-intercepting-wheat-stock>

SUKKUR NAB READIES FOUR REFERENCES ON WHEAT SCAM

The Newspaper's Correspondent May 11, 2020

SUKKUR: The Sukkur region of the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) has prepared four references concerning misappropriation of billions of rupees worth of wheat in food department and is ready to file them in accountability court, according to sources.

Sources in the NAB said the references would be filed after seeking formal approval of the bureau's chairman. In this connection, a meeting of NAB's regional board presided over by its Sukkur director general reviewed the scam in Sukkur, Larkana and Shaheed Benazirabad divisions and accorded approval to the references prepared against the corrupt officials of food department.

The sources said the NAB chairman himself had issued directives to file the references over growing complaints about large-scale corruption in food department in different districts of the province.

The sources said that a reference accused deputy director food Anees-ur-Rehman Mahar, district food controller Mohammad Iqbal Memon and others of Rs128 million corruption and another reference blamed Khairpur district food controller Mohammad Ali Ujjan and others of more than Rs58m graft in the stored grain.

The third reference accused Larkana district food controller Zahid Ali Unnar and others of Rs870m corruption and the fourth blamed Kandhkot-Kashmore's deputy director of food Fazal Mohammad Bhangwar and others of more than Rs74m graft.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556096/sukkur-nab-readies-four-references-on-wheat-scam>

IT'S A SEASON OF MANGOES AND COVID-19

Mohammad Hussain Khan May 11, 2020

THE season of the king of fruits — mangoes — has started. But this year, it starts amidst serious concerns of coronavirus spreading in Sindh's rural areas since thousands of labourers arrive from South Punjab, mainly Muzaffargarh. Under the current circumstances, allowing them to enter Sindh is risky since this may allow the contagion to spread in rural areas which, by and large, have remained safe compared with urban areas.

To harvest mangoes, big orchard owners let out their farms to contractors. Punjab's labourers – hired by the orchard contractors – have begun to arrive in Sindh's mango farms, which are larger, through different means of transport, while consignments from these farms have started reaching Punjab.

Till May 7, the Sindh government was debating standard operating procedures (SOPs) to let these workers enter the province. Draft SOPs have been presented to the Sindh government by Sharjeel Inam Memon, an orchard owner who is a Sindh Assembly member from Hyderabad's rural area. He had raised this issue of Punjab's labourers with the government as they turned up in thousands.

"I have discussed SOPs with the Sindh chief minister and he has not yet finalised them. We are trying to see the situation is handled adroitly," says Mr Memon, an influential member of Sindh's ruling party.

Among other measures, the 11-point draft recommends that growers/contractors provide a list of workers from other provinces. It also states enrollment forms will have to be filled and submitted before revenue officials within five working days of labourers commencing work. Items such as gloves, masks and hand sanitisers have to be provided to those working along the entire mango value chain.

Every grower has to try to engage the maximum number of local labourers and minimise hiring from elsewhere for plucking and packing purposes. If a worker develops Covid-19 symptoms, he has to be sent for a checkup. A proforma has to be filled by each worker for tracking and tracing purposes.

‘There is no rocket science involved which would prevent local labour from learning to pluck or pack mangoes. Previously, nobody thought of departing from the conventional practice of labour coming in from Punjab to Sindh because there was no reason for it’

The Sindh government is continuously resisting pressure from the PTI-led federal government, as well as the business community, to ease the lockdown. The chief minister had even differed, rightly so, with the 20-point SOPs mutually agreed between the ulema and President Arif Alvi on Taraweeh prayers in Ramazan to stem the spread of the contagion. He feared the SOPs will not be implementable therefore sought to restrict prayer congregations.

Currently, Sindh health officials dealing with the Covid-19 situation and pandemic trajectory believe May is going to be tough from the point of view of a spike in the number of cases. “We are bracing for an exponential rise in cases if the lockdown is eased,” observes a Sindh health official associated with monitoring the Covid-19 situation. “The impact of the decision taken for opening up of businesses will be seen after a fortnight,” he asserted.

Labourers have already started to arrive unchecked in Sindh from Punjab where an upward trend in the number of cases can be seen, and more are on their way. It is a foregone conclusion that the SOPs specific to mango workers will not be doable, any more than those that were drafted for prayer congregations.

“I think this is an opportunity that can bring local labourers forward and help overcome unemployment currently seen in the pandemic’s backdrop,” says Sindh agriculture minister Ismail Rahu, who is the son of hari leader Fazil Rahu. The real issue, he opines, pertains to big farms that are let out to contractors who hire workers from Punjab. “One expert worker brought from Punjab for each farm should be enough, the rest should be purely local labourers to handle the mango crop this season. This is how they will get trained as well,” he remarks.

The issue of workers from Punjab coming to Sindh has surfaced for the first time because of the pandemic, otherwise, it was conventional practice for orchard owners and contractors. Locally known as bharawa and thukawa, labour from Punjab has picked, sorted and packed mangoes with dexterity for years.

The contractors’ argument is since available local labour is not trained, engaging them would cause mango wastage and result in monetary losses. Therefore, this issue is more of contractors than of orchard owners.

Labour from Punjab arrives in groups of 40-50 people. Depending on the size of an orchard, multiple teams work together, switching from one farm to another if need be. They stay at farms and leave once the season is finished, awaiting the arrival of kinnow season in Punjab.

“There is no rocket science involved which would prevent local labour from learning to pluck or pack mangoes. Nobody thought of departing from conventional practice before because there was no reason for it,” remarks Sindh Abadgar Board vice president Mahmood Nawaz Shah, who is also an owner of mango orchards and an exporter. To quote a medium-sized mango grower Nadeem Shah, Punjab’s labour is cheap as well as trained.

The Sindh government remained worried till all the men from Tableeghi Jamaat – who became virus carriers in the province in March – recovered and were repatriated home. The government's efforts to ensure safe transportation was praised. Given its lockdown policy, it is unlikely that the Murad Shah-led government will have two different standards relating to the same emergency.

While things are challenging this year, it is an opportunity to engage local labour so that they get trained and there is less reliance on workers from another province next season. It would not be difficult for the locals to learn the art of sorting and plucking since they work in the fields all year round. Is saving mangoes more important than saving lives?

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556252/its-a-season-of-mangoes-and-covid-19>

AGRICULTURAL HARDSHIP UNDER LOCKDOWN

Amjad Mahmood Updated May 11, 2020

THE agriculture sector is facing one of its biggest crises. On one hand, erratic weather and the resultant untimely heavy rains and hailstorms, coupled with the locust attack, are making it hard for farmers to sleep at night. On the other hand, the lockdown since mid-March has created many challenges and negatively impacted the rural population in general and small farm holders in particular.

The prolonged shutdown across the country has not only reduced on-farms activities but also disturbed the transport and sale of crops, vegetables and fruits, as well as the purchase of farm inputs.

Livestock, the most important sub-sector which contributes around 60 per cent of agriculture's share to GDP, is the major victim of the Covid-19 outbreak. To meet their day-to-day expenses, small farmers rear milch cattle and sell the milk. Closure of tea-stalls, sweets shops and the reduced timing for milk shops under the lockdown's standard operating procedures (SOPs) shrank demand for this highly perishable commodity and thus cut its rates.

Salahuddin, a smallholder farmer from Narang Mandi town near Lahore, says he gets 72 litres of milk from his nine buffaloes. Before the lockdown, the milkman would give him Rs80 per litre but now is not willing to buy at even Rs50 per litre citing hurdles in the onward sale because of virus issues. Likewise, owner of a known sweet shop in Mian Channu (Khanewal) has his own dairy farm but since he is disallowed to open his business because of the lockdown, he is forced to sell milk at Rs40 per litre in the town, says Pakistan Kissan Ittehad general secretary Mian Umair, who belongs to the area.

Some dairy farmers are turning towards value addition in the form of mozzarella cheese and ghee to prolong milk's shelf life rather than sell it at throwaway prices

Initially suffering at the hands of the milkman, Mr Salahuddin is now trying to find a solution through value addition: he is preparing (mozzarella quality) cheese and trying to sell it online. Even if he doesn't manage to find buyers, this will enhance the shelf life of the milk. Similarly, some dairy farmers are making desi ghee out of milk instead of selling the commodity at throwaway prices.

Closure of hotels and the ban on weddings and parties is also hurting the once thriving poultry sector. Vegetables are also being sold at low rates in the wholesale market though end consumers are not benefitting from the low prices as the middlemen are making a killer profit.

“The first month of the lockdown was particularly difficult for farmers as delinked from the markets, they had to sell their dairy and farm products at throwaway prices,” says Farooq Tariq, general secretary of Pakistan Kissan Rabita Committee, a representative of smallholder farmers. “Those engaged in producing horticulture, floriculture and dairy farming were shattered with the losses for being forced to market their commodities at whatever rate offered in the local bazaar.”

Hanf Hanjra, a horticulturist from Sargodha, says previously he earned a good living during the wedding and Ramazan seasons by dispatching his produce to big markets like Lahore and Gujranwala. “However, this time I’m hardly able to meet my expenses because I’m forced to sell my farm produce in the local market at much lower rates as either transport to far-off markets is not available or its charges are unaffordable.” He claims he could not once cover transport charges even for the Sargodha market where his four maunds (around 160kg) of coriander was sold for just Rs70 in wholesale.

Unfortunately, the harvesting season of wheat, politically the most important crop, has also fallen in this time of social distancing. The already scarce manual labour has been further reduced because of mobility issues in the wake of the pandemic. And this gap in demand and supply has pushed up wages of available farmworkers.

“Labour is costlier this year as workers face problems crossing police check-posts erected to curtail the movement of people,” says Mian Umair. Previously, he would pay 160kg per acre of wheat to a worker for reaping his crop and now this rate has gone up to 210kg per acre. Facing issues trying to convince the mostly illiterate labour force to observe social distancing rules, he says he had to hire manpower from as far as Kasur district, more than 200km away from Mian Channu.

The farming sector was also hit because of difficulties in obtaining inputs and the shutdown of agriculture-engineering and allied industries. Though the government has permitted auto workshops to function when the wheat harvesting season sets in, the decision to allow shops of lath machines, spare parts, etc came a bit late in the day and farmers could not get their tractors, tube-wells and allied machines repaired in time. There were also difficulties in procuring medicine for cattle, bemoans Mr Salah.

Mr Tariq regrets that small farmers, one of the hardest-hit class by the lockdown, are not being considered for compensation by the government. He fears that this will lead to the compounding of rural poverty, disabling particularly the landless farmers from the purchase of seed and other farm inputs for the next crop.

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QCCI BACKS FLOUR MILLERS’ DEMAND

CORRESPONDENT May 11, 2020

QUETTA. Quetta Chamber of Commerce and Industry backed Pakistan Flour Mills Association’s demand of lifting inter-district ban on the transportation of wheat in the name of coronavirus lockdown. “Section 144 is imposed across Balochistan to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

However, the ban on inter-district transportation on wheat could cause food shortage in the province,” said QCCI Senior Vice President Badaruddin Kakar in a statement issued on Saturday. Kakar accused the provincial government and food department of deliberately causing wheat turmoil in Balochistan to ruin the provincial flour mill industry.

“Naseerabad, Jhal Magsi and Jaffar districts fulfill wheat requirements of other districts of the province. Despite the fact, Balochistan government making any policy and strategy,” said the QCCI senior vice president in the statement.

He alleged the provincial government for attempting to create wheat shortage to increase flour prices across the province. Criticising wheat procurement policy of the government, Kakar said, "Balochistan produces 80 to 90 million sacks of wheat in a year but the government announced to procure only one million sacks which will ruin the flour mills business in the province.

https://epaper.tribune.com.pk/DisplayDetails.aspx?ENI_ID=11202005110209&EN_ID=11202005110063&EMID=11202005110030

PAKISTAN'S SUGAR POLICY NEEDS REFORMS

By HARI LOHANO Published: May 11, 2020

KARACHI: In the midst of the coronavirus crisis, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government has released the probe commission report on the misuse of sugar and wheat subsidies in the country.

The report shows the power and influence of sugar barons in relation to the country's policy-making. Most of the names mentioned in the report are close associates of the PM, the PTI and the ministers in the government.

PM Imran deserves much credit for the release of the report. He has promised to take decisive action after the probe commission submits its final recommendations.

Findings of the report raise crucial questions about the government's sugar policy and the transparency of its economic policy. How does the sugar policy work? How sugar subsidy benefits only the sugar industry?

Sugarcane is a high-value, rich farmer's crop due its special characteristics. Its per-acre expenses are much higher than any other cash crop.

The time from planting to harvesting is longer. Its marketing chain, from buying seed to arranging tractor trollies for transporting it to sugar mills, negotiating price and finally getting payment, involves very lengthy processes. This favours the rich and better-off farmers as against the cash-starved small landowners.

Pakistan is among the top 10 sugarcane producing countries in the world, with plantations over a million hectares. Sugarcane production accounts for nearly two-thirds of the area in Punjab and a quarter in Sindh.

It uses more of the subsidised agricultural inputs, especially fertiliser and water, than any other crop in the economy. In a highly water-stressed country like Pakistan, sugarcane uses a much higher quantity of water than any other crop.

Between 2013-14 and 2017-18, according to the Economic Survey of Pakistan, the production of sugarcane increased by an impressive 24%, from 67 to 83 million tonnes.

During this period, the area where sugarcane was cultivated increased by 14% from 1.17 to 1.34 million hectares. The average yield per hectare, rising from 57 to 62 tonnes, shows an increase of only 8%.

The area under sugarcane cultivation in Pakistan is the fifth largest in the world after Brazil, India, China and Thailand. Its per-hectare yield, however, is much lower than the other major producers.

Its yield of 62 tonnes per hectare in 2018 was well below the world average of 73 tonnes and even below India's yield of 80 tonnes.

Figures for last year's crop (2018-19), compared with the average performance of crops in the previous five years, showed a decline of 9% in sugarcane cultivation and 6% in production. This decline is mainly attributed to late payments to farmers, shortage of water and an uncertain political environment during the 2018 election.

As in production, Pakistan is among the top 10 countries in consumption of sugar in the world and the biggest consumer of sugar in South Asia. Consumption of sugar is over 25 kg per person per year in Pakistan. In India, it is 20 kg and in China 11 kg.

Pakistan has 89 sugar mills, a much higher number than needed for domestic requirement. Some of these are located in regions where they are economically unviable and environmentally unsuitable.

Most of these mills are owned by very influential and powerful families. They belong to the governing party, the main opposition parties and the families of former generals.

At the time of Independence in 1947, there were only two sugar mills in the country. Until 1970, there were only four.

The mushroom growth of the mills was mainly during General Zia's period of office (1977-1988), when state patronage was provided to create a new business and political class to counter political opposition to his dictatorial rule. Since then, all the major political parties have followed this path and expanded it.

This growth of the sugar industry has had a very adverse effect on the country's other climatically suitable cash crop, cotton, which has been the backbone of the agriculture sector and a major source of foreign currency reserves for the country.

Between 2013-14 and 2017-18, the area under cotton cultivation declined by 4% and its production by 6%. More strikingly, when 2018-19 is compared with the average performance of the crop in the previous five years, its cultivation area has declined by 17% and production fell by two million bales or 20%.

The pricing policy for sugarcane and sugar is based on government intervention in the market through huge public subsidies, direct and indirect, at various levels of production and sale of the commodity.

At the time of harvesting the crop, the government announces a guaranteed minimum price for sugarcane, to encourage farmers to increase the area under cultivation. The government even decides about the movement of the crop – to ensure that sugar mill owners receive plenty of the produce to keep their business viable.

To protect the sugar industry further, the government imposes higher tariffs on sugar imports to "stabilise" prices in the domestic market. In general, the domestic price for sugar remains much higher than the average world price.

In addition, the government provides an export subsidy on sugar in the name of increasing foreign currency reserves.

The government's decision in September 2018 to allow export of sugar, despite early indications of low production in the country, was a continuation of past public policy to protect the industry.

Pakistan exported 0.4 million tonnes of sugar in 2016-17 and 1.6 million tonnes in 2017-18. Moreover, in 2017, during the period of Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) government, the sugar export quota was increased from 0.5 to 2 million tonnes.

There are two prices for refined sugar in the domestic market. One is the ex-mill price, which is the wholesale price at which the mill sells its product to traders and shopkeepers. The other is the retail price of sugar sold to customers at local corner shops and supermarkets – the price paid by common consumers.

The decision to export the commodity caused a hike in both these prices. The ex-mill price increased from Rs52 to Rs54 per kg in January 2019. The retail price, however, increased from Rs56 to Rs59, a rise of 6%.

With the increasing exports, prices increased regularly for domestic consumers. Even after the ban on sugar exports in February, prices remain on the higher side.

Between December 2019 and March 2020, the ex-mill price for sugar increased by 39% to Rs72. In the same period, the retail price increased by 33% to Rs80.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s April 2020 report also mentions that wholesale prices for sugar in Pakistan were over 50% higher in March than the international prices.

The sugar industry has benefitted enormously from the government's policy. In addition to the export subsidy of Rs3 billion by the Punjab government, the sugar mill owners have received extra profit to the extent of Rs85 billion – Rs5.7 billion per month from January 2019 to the end of March 2020.

The above discussion demonstrates that the government's sugar policy distorts the local market. This harms poor the most and inflicts huge costs on the domestic economy. The only beneficiary is the influential and powerful sugar industry.

At the time of pandemic and huge risks to economy, the government should refrain from intervening in the sugar market and consider reforms in the industry through parliamentary procedures and democratic practices.

In this hour of economic crisis, the government should focus more on the protection of poor and welfare of society through the provision of public goods like healthcare and strengthen the social safety nets.

The writer is a PhD from the UK and writes for The Guardian as well

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2218472/2-pakistans-sugar-policy-needs-reforms/>

HAILSTORM DAMAGES WHEAT CROP, ORCHARDS IN BAJAUR

The Newspaper's Correspondent Updated May 12, 2020

KHAR: Rain coupled with hailstorm damaged standing wheat crop, vegetables and orchards in Mamond tehsil of Bajaur tribal district, residents and officials said on Monday.

They said that hailstorm accompanied by rain started just after Iftari and lasted for about one hour.

They said that Dabar, Badan, Shah Goo, Shahi Thangi, Mokha, Kalpanim Kaga, Sewai and other hilly areas were the worst affected.

Local residents told this correspondent that hailstones were very large in size, severely damaging the standing crop of wheat, vegetables and orchards in the region.

They said that the growers were expecting good harvest of wheat crop this year, but hailstones largely damaged it.

District agriculture officer Ziaul Islam Dawar told Dawn that the hailstorm caused extensive damage to wheat crop and vegetables in Mamond tehsil.

Published in Dawn, May 12th, 2020

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556473/hailstorm-damages-wheat-crop-orchards-in-bajaur>

33,000 TONS OF WHEAT RECOVERED DURING RAIDS: MINISTER

By RECORDER REPORT on May 12, 2020

The Punjab Food Department has so far recovered 33,130 tons of stored wheat by raiding 436 storage places in different districts of the province.

The recovered wheat has been seized and action is being taken against the accused under the law, said Senior Minister Punjab Abdul Aleem Khan here on Monday.

The minister said that strict action was being taken against wheat stockpiling across the province and crackdown was being carried out indiscriminately against the elements involved in this heinous crime.

In a briefing session of the food department, Aleem Khan said that for the last two weeks, strict checks were being carried out on the land and river routes of Punjab where smuggling of wheat had been curtailed with the help of the intelligence agencies and Rangers.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/12/596146/three-3000-tons-of-wheat-recovered-during-raids-minister/>

KHARIF SEASON PADDY TO BE SOWN OVER 4.618M ACRES IN PUNJAB

RECORDER REPORT May 12, 2020

SIALKOT: More than 4.618 million acres of land would be brought under paddy crop during Kharif season in various rice growing areas of the Punjab.

Sources in Agriculture department told Business Recorder on Monday that the department had chalked out a well-knitted training programme to create awareness among the growers about the use of recommended seed and proper use of fertilizer to attain the fixed target in Punjab.

In this regard, the department deputed special training teams which were visiting various villages for providing proper guidance and assistance about the use of inputs, nursery sowing and transfer of plants into fields to the rice growers in the Punjab.

In Sialkot district, paddy will be cultivated on 317030 acres of land in Sialkot, Daska, Pasrur and Sambrial tehsils during Kharif season. The paddy would be sown on 91083 acres in Sialkot, 78053 acres in Daska, 103098 acres in Pasrur and 44796 acres in Sambrial tehsils of Sialkot district. Local agriculture department had initiated farmers training programme in 1442 villages of Sialkot, Daska, Pasrur and Sambrial tehsils of Sialkot district. Special training teams were busy to empower rice growers for enhancing per acre yield, sowing of paddy nurseries, utilization of irrigation water, pesticides and fertilizer as well as about the different varieties of paddy in Sialkot district, the sources added.

Some progressive farmers were adopting modern technology for raising rice nursery by automatic machine in plastic trays at local agriculture farm and ready for transplanting by 'Rice Trans Planter' in Bajwat area of Sialkot.

<https://epaper.brecorder.com/2020/05/12/10-page/836745-news.html>

TRADING ACTIVITIES RESUME ON COTTON MARKET

By RECORDER REPORT on May 12, 2020

Trading activities resume on the cotton market on Monday after the closure of more than one and a half months due to the coronavirus lockdown.

Market sources said that traders are hopeful that situation will be improved gradually after the softening of the lockdown by the government.

Cotton analyst Naseem Usman told that both federal and provincial governments should take steps to save the cotton crop from the locust attack. The recent report of Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations warned of a potentially serious food security crisis this year in several regional countries, including Pakistan, due to locust attacks.

It is expected that Pakistan's Rabi and Kharif crops will be badly affected by locust attack. According to the estimates Pakistan's economy has to bear the loss of Rs 669 billion due to the locust attack during the current year.

Naseem Usman said that Spot Rate Committee of Karachi Cotton Association has stabled the spot rate at Rs 8600 per maund. The rate of cotton in Sindh and Punjab is in between Rs 7000 to Rs 8600 per maund. The rate of polyester fiber was decreased by Rs 3 per kg and was available at Rs 157 per kg.

<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/12/596129/trading-activities-resume-on-cotton-market/>

K-P CHALKS OUT STRATEGY TO BATTLE LOCUSTS

By Our Correspondent Published: May 12, 2020

PESHAWAR: After crops in multiple districts were ravaged by locusts, the provincial government on Monday said that it has prepared an inclusive strategy for tackling the pests.

Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (K-P) Minister for Agriculture and Livestock, Mohibullah Khan on Monday presided over a meeting to review the agriculture department's response to battling swarms of locusts.

Agriculture Secretary Israr Khan, Agriculture Extension Director-General Abid Kamal and other senior officials attended the meeting.

The provincial agriculture minister was briefed on the presence of locusts and measures to control it.

The minister was told that teams have been formed at the district level where locust swarms are present.

At least 25,833 acres of land has been sprayed with insecticides in 15 districts of the province to control the locusts, the minister was told.

To further control the roving swarms of locusts, Mohibullah was told that aerial spray will also be conducted.

The locusts entered K-P through Sherani, Mosakhel and Zhobs districts of Balochistan on January 25 this year and since then have spread to several southern districts of the province.

As a result, the provincial government had been forced to impose an emergency in all locust-hit districts of K-P on January 28. The emergency was later extended to other districts of the province which were affected by locusts.

Published in The Express Tribune, May 12th, 2020.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2219416/1-k-p-chalks-strategy-battle-locusts/>

CS ORDERS GOVT DEPTS TO COLLABORATE TO COMBAT LOCUSTS

By APP Published: May 12, 2020

LAHORE: Punjab Chief Secretary Jawwad Rafique Malik on Monday directed the departments concerned to work collectively on scientific lines to combat locust. "These departments include Provincial Disaster Management Authority (PDMA), Agriculture, Livestock and Forest."

He expressed these views while presiding over a meeting to review steps to control locust in the province. Senior Member Board of Revenue (SMBR) Babar Hayat Tarar, Agriculture secretary, PDMA director general and senior army officers attended the meeting. The SMBR told the meeting that 150 vehicles and 260 motorcycle were being used for spray in locust-affected areas and so far 114,406 hectares of land had been covered.

As many as 760 solo power were also being utilized for carrying out spray, he added. He further said that a working group headed by SMBR and comprising secretaries of different departments including Finance, Agriculture, Livestock and Forest was supervising the situation.

Similarly, a core committee consisting of Agriculture DG, PDMA DG, representatives of army and Cholistan Development Authority was working against the pest.

Published in The Express Tribune, May 12th, 2020.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2219454/1-cs-orders-govt-depts-collaborate-combat-locusts/>

ECC READY TO APPROVE FARM PACKAGE

By Zafar Bhutta Published: May 12, 2020

ISLAMABAD: The Economic Coordination Committee (ECC), which is scheduled to meet on Wednesday, is set to approve a Rs56-billion bailout package for the agriculture sector amid the growing impact of Covid-19 pandemic.

The government has already announced a stimulus package of over Rs1.2 trillion to cushion the impact of Covid-19. Out of this, Rs100 billion has been earmarked for giving relief to small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and the agriculture sector.

The Ministry of National Food Security and Research has prepared a package of incentives for farmers in various sub-sectors of the agriculture sector to help them to cope with the impact of Covid-19. The ministry has submitted its proposals for ECC's consideration.

The food security ministry has proposed a subsidy of Rs925 per bag of di-ammonium phosphate (DAP) and other phosphoric fertilisers and Rs243 per bag of urea and other nitrogen fertilisers. Total subsidy cost will be Rs37 billion.

Agrarian dilemma: Is the smart subsidy really smart for Pakistani farmers?

The subsidy scheme will be implemented by the provinces and funds will be disbursed through the scratch card scheme, already being implemented by Punjab. The subsidy on fertilisers has been proposed for the Kharif crop (April-October).

At present, the government gives subsidy to fertiliser manufacturers on gas supply that is said to be not fully passed on to consumers. This time, the government has decided to give a direct subsidy to the farmers.

Farmers have been facing high-interest rates of up to 18.4% on bank loans. This has been a major problem that has caused losses to them over the past few years as they cannot add adequate inputs to crops.

Now, the government has decided to reduce the mark-up on loans. However, the proposed rate of interest is still high that the farmers may not be able to afford.

At present, the mark-up on agricultural loans provided by Zarai Taraqati Bank Limited is 18.4%. A reduction to 10% has been proposed for 2020 for ECC's approval. The mark-up subsidy will require Rs8.8 billion.

A subsidy of Rs150 per kg of cottonseed has been recommended for the Kharif 2020 crop season in Punjab and Sindh. This subsidy will require an amount of Rs2.3 billion.

Another subsidy of Rs300 per bag of pesticides, meant for combating white fly, has been proposed. The subsidy will cover five million acres in Punjab and Sindh, which is around 80% of the cotton area. The total cost of the subsidy will be Rs6 billion.

The food security ministry has proposed 5% sales tax subsidy on locally manufactured tractors for one year. The total cost of the subsidy will be Rs2.5 billion. Sources said the finance ministry had endorsed the subsidy for the agriculture sector.

Published in The Express Tribune, May 12th, 2020.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2219479/2-ecc-ready-approve-farm-package/>

CHICKEN PRICES SHOOT UP

Aamir Shafaat Khan May 13, 2020

KARACHI: Retailers have raised the prices of chicken beyond the reach of many people as the live bird is selling at Rs230-240 per kg and meat at Rs350-400 per kg, showing an increase of Rs70-80 a kilo over the past few days.

Surprisingly, the official rate of live bird and its meat is Rs138 and Rs214 per kg but shopkeepers have neither displayed the price list, nor are they selling the bird at the control rate.

Poultry retailers are demanding Rs600 for boneless chicken as compared to Rs500 per kg.

Poultry traders say that prices usually crash on low demand and soar on high demand, but here they link the price hike to a short supply of birds from farms.

General secretary of the Sindh Poultry Wholesalers and Retailers Association Kamal Akhtar Siddiqui said in last week of March, poultry industry had warned consumers regarding price hike in coming months because farmers were not putting day-old chicks at their farms owing to massive decline in sale due to closure of wedding halls, restaurants, hotels, barbecues, etc, during the lockdown which was imposed in third week of March to control spread of coronavirus.

He said wholesale price of live bird had risen to Rs210 from Rs140 and meat to Rs367 from Rs245 per kg.

“Despite price hike, poultry is still cheaper when compared with veal meat prices of Rs600-700 per kg (with and without bones) and mutton at Rs1,200 per kg,” he said adding that even good quality fish was selling at Rs700 per kg.

The government had allowed online sale of food during limited hours slightly offsetting the negative impact of low chicken sale to some extent.

A number of people prefer to make chicken-related dishes at home rather than taking risk of ordering online food in view of lingering coronavirus threat.

Consumers are now paying the price of huge losses of poultry sector’s declining sales in March and April and the government’s price control machinery does not exist to rescue consumers, some observers said.

The government has remained focused towards dealing with the opening of different trades and finalising standard operating procedures (SOPs) for various industries since the start of lockdown.

However, with or without price list, stakeholders had continued to challenge the government’s writ in selling products on their own terms.

There is literally no fear among shopkeepers, wholesalers and product manufacturers to face any strict action like heavy fines or imprisonment against price hike, the observers added.

The Pakistan Poultry Association (PPA) in last week of March said that hatcheries had stopped setting eggs for chick production amid depressed sales.

Egg layers had also been culled, which was already showing signs of short supply of eggs.

Broiler breeders, which were consuming feed, had been sold at throwaway prices for meat.

From the above situation, birds supply in the markets would remain in short supply in coming months.

Published in Dawn, May 13th, 2020

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556656/chicken-prices-shoot-up>

RAHU REITERATES NEED FOR CENTRE’S HELP TO KEEP LOCUSTS AT BAY

The Newspaper's Staff Correspondent May 13, 2020

HYDERABAD: Sindh Minister for Agriculture Ismail Rahu has apprehended that locusts currently present in many districts of the province could cause heavy damage to the agriculture sector if not eliminated before rainfall.

“It’s the most dangerous enemy we are faced with after Covide-19,” he remarked while chairing a meeting of agriculture extension officials and later addressing a press conference at Shahbaz Hall here on Tuesday.

Mr Rahu was of the view that locusts would inflict a heavy loss to agricultural produce in Sindh and Punjab in the next few months as monsoon was approaching. The loss would ultimately cause food insecurity on a large scale, he added.

“It’s a major issue as the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and other international forums have already warned that locusts could attack Pakistan 10 times this year,” the minister said.

He told the meeting that the federal government should help Sindh carry out aerial spray to eliminate locusts' swarms that had already devoured standing crops and green patches in many districts and were a potential threat to remaining agricultural fields in Sindh.

He noted that the swarms were constantly attacking certain districts over the past two months.

He recalled that the federal government had declared a 'national emergency' in January this year and prepared a national action plan to deal with the menace in three phases. "The first phase is near completion but no significant success has been achieved so far," he pointed out, and regretted that no effective action was being taken while only meetings after meetings on the issue were being held.

The minister quoted surveys, conducted by some international organisations, suggesting that 300,000 square kilometre area of Pakistan could come under locust attack. The areas identified in the surveys were 50pc of Balochistan, 35pc of Sindh and 15pc of Punjab. "This means that 100,000sq-km area is vulnerable and 50,000sq-km area has already come under attack or threatened by the swarms existing in Sindh," he said.

He, however, noted that this time, locusts swarms in Sindh appeared to be in transition and that was why they did not cause a huge loss to crops but during and after rainfall, they would definitely pose a serious threat to farmlands in the province. "The swarms are flying towards India but very likely to return in the rainy season," he said, adding that myriads of swarms did exist in Iran as well and could enter Pakistan via Balochistan.

"We apprehend a three- or four-pronged invasion by locusts from the desert areas of Sindh targeting seven districts and this would be an alarming situation," he said.

Mr Rahu called for effective and coordinated joint efforts by his department, federal plant protection department, National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) and other relevant departments to face the challenge. He noted that the army also stood by the Sindh government in this exercise.

Explaining Sindh's position in this context, the minister said aerial spray was the most effective method but there was only one aircraft without a pilot made available to the provincial government against the actual requirement of six each with a pilot. He said the available aircraft was meant for aerial spray in Sukkur district while five other ones were required for such operations in three other districts — Hyderabad, Mirpur-khas and Shaheed Benazirabad. Also, against the requirement of 25 sprayer-mounted vehicles, only five were made available to Sindh, he added.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556649/rahu-reiterates-need-for-centres-help-to-keep-locusts-at-bay>

OTTON PRODUCTION SLIDE

By NUZHAT NAZAR on May 13, 2020

The Federal Cabinet on Tuesday decided that the support price of cotton should be fixed after thorough consultations with all the stakeholders in order to encourage farmers to sow more and more cotton as its cultivation has been woefully declining.

Prime minister Imran Khan, who chaired the cabinet's meeting, was in favour of giving subsidies on cotton seed and fertilizer, so that poor growers could benefit.

The cabinet also decided to amend laws on appointment of heads of various government institutions and autonomous bodies in the country. It also reviewed the audit reports relating to alleged embezzlement in the affairs of Karachi Port Trust (KPT).

After the federal cabinet meeting, Information Minister Senator Shibli Faraz, while giving a news briefing, said that a seven-point agenda was discussed in the cabinet meeting.

The information minister said a committee has been constituted to frame a law with regard to appointment of heads for government entities.

He said the committee will work under the supervision of Advisor for Institutional Reforms Dr Ishrat Hussain, which will present its recommendations within a week.

He said Minister for Narcotics Control Azam Khan Swati presented 39 proposals to the prime minister on electoral reforms, which the prime minister appreciated.

The information minister said the decisions of the Cabinet Committee on Energy were ratified in the meeting, while the prime minister directed to expedite the reforms in the energy sector.

Shibli Faraz also said that the PTI is the only party, which has introduced reforms in the electoral process, while reforms in the energy sector are the government's priority.

The information minister said the cabinet approved the names of the National Commission for the Status of Women but the members would be decided by the prime minister.

He said that the cabinet had approved the application of Pakistan Essential Services Act, 1952, on all employees of the National Institutional Facilitation Technology and the approval had been given for six months.

Shibli Faraz also said that the cabinet approved the appointment of member National Accounts and member Census in the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, and also approved the audit to rectify the irregularities in the affairs of the Karachi Port Trust (KPT).

The cabinet approved the names of the members of the National Commission for Status of Women and National Bureau of Statistics.

It also approved decisions taken by the Cabinet's Committee on Energy and Economic Coordination Committee.

The information minister said the cabinet reviewed matters pertaining to audit survey regarding embezzlement in Karachi Port Trust.

Senator Shibli Faraz said Prime Minister Imran Khan also sought a report regarding illegal and unlawful appointments in 12 different ministries within one week.

Talking about the coronavirus challenge, the minister said no country in the world can afford continuous lockdown, and a decision regarding ease in countrywide lockdown was taken in view of difficulties being faced by poor labour class.

He said the government has limited resources and infrastructure, and continuous lockdown was not possible under the prevailing conditions.

The minister urged the citizens and members of the civil society to adopt all necessary precautionary measures, follow guidelines and the SOPs, and support government in its endeavors to contain the pandemic.

APP adds: The PM said all the lacunas in the election laws would be addressed so that the people's trust in the election process was restored and nobody could raise a finger on the transparency of election. A transparent and credible electoral process was the foundation of democracy and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) was the only party which had taken serious efforts and practical steps for electoral reforms.

Expressing the government's commitment, the prime minister directed to intensify efforts so that electoral reforms process should be completed as soon as possible.

Shibli Faraz said the cabinet discussed the issue of unlawful appointments made in various ministries during the previous governments. It transpired that appointments without any cabinet approval were made in 12 ministries. Expressing his serious concern, the prime minister directed all the ministries to share details in next cabinet meeting so that action could be taken on the issue.

Senator Shibli Faraz said the cabinet also approved the names of the members of National Commission on the Status of Women, including Shaista Bukhari from Punjab, Habiba Hassan from Sindh, Rubina Naz Advocate from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Fatima Iqbal from Balochistan, Madhiha Sultana from AJK, Sosan Aziz from Gilgit Baltistan and Asia Azeem from the Federal Capital.

The minister said the PM directed steps for provision of energy to the consumers at affordable rates and reduction of the circular debt. He also directed the minister for energy to complete the process of reformation in various departments of the ministry with a time line.

He said Minister for Planning and Development Asad Umar gave a briefing on the steps being taken to control the coronavirus in the country and presented the report on the situation after relaxation in the lockdown.

Imran Khan remarked that activities in the construction and other sectors had even been allowed by the developed countries keeping in view the ground realities. Keeping the economy afloat and balancing security measures was imperative, he added.

Shibli Faraz it was observed that generally the people did not adopt precautionary measures and the cabinet appealed to them to strictly follow the standard operating procedures (SOPs) as the country could not afford a surge in the coronavirus cases.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/13/596489/country-on-the-brink-of-a-wheat-crisis-pbif-chief/>

PPA OPPOSES PUNJAB GOVT'S BID TO CONTROL POULTRY PRICES

By RECORDER REPORT on May 13, 2020

Pakistan Poultry Association (Northern Region) has urged the Punjab government to allow the free-market mechanism to regulate demand and supply instead of intervening in market prices.

PPA (Northern Region) Vice Chairman Chaudhry Muhammad Fargham while talking to media persons here on Tuesday said the industry was very hurt and depressed by the Punjab government's action of controlling the prices of live chicken and meat. He claimed that the commissioner animal husbandry in the ministry of national food security had submitted cost

of production to the Chief Justice of Peshawar High Court as far back as in March 2012 at Rs 31.27 for day old chicks and Rs 132.50/kg for broilers. The current costs are around Rs 45 for day old chick and Rs 160 for broilers. As per calculation of Director PRI Rawalpindi, the cost of production is Rs.145 per kg live.

The association kept the government fully abreast of the situation through different means and said it would lead to an acute shortage of poultry products as the losses would result in a reduction in production and that prices will shoot up. "We had advised the government that in the event of an increase in price, supply would partially but gradually increase to some extent. We had strongly advised the government not to intervene in free-market mechanism but the governments paid no heed," he added.

He said now the market is allowing surviving farmers to recover their losses, the administration is arresting the sellers of chicken meat and forcing them to sell meat at Rs 260/Kg. Such actions would lead to long term closure of poultry farms, which would lead to not only a tremendous increase in chicken meat prices but also mutton, beef and pulses as well, he warned.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/13/596558/govt-committed-to-fulfill-commitments-under-27th-intl-conventions-tweets-pm/>

LOCUST ATTACKS COULD INCREASE TEN TIMES THIS YEAR, FEARS MINISTER

By RECORDER REPORT on May 13, 2020

Sindh Minister for Agriculture Mohammed Ismail Rahu has said that according to the agriculture experts of the world the swarms of locust attacks could be increased ten times more than those of the last year. He informed that the season of two main crops of cotton and rice was about to start as well as monsoon season was going to start soon which was also the breeding season for locusts as well therefore three months of June, July and August were important in this regard.

This he said while presiding over a meeting about preventive measures for Locust attacks at Agriculture Extension Office, Shahbaz Building, Hyderabad on Tuesday.

The minister further said that swarms of locusts were attacking in Sindh like last year and this danger could not be avoided. He directed the officers concerned for stopping the breeding of locusts in deserted areas of Sindh which according to him could be effective. He said that all resources would be utilized for the elimination of locusts. He asked the officers concerned to take this task as challenge and utilize their expertise and experience to eliminate locusts and save standing crops. He underlined the need for focusing Mirpurkhas, Sukkur and Shaheed Benazirabad divisions situated near to Thar Desert which was the breeding area of locusts.

He said that Sindh Agriculture Department had remained busy for elimination of locusts for one year. Rahu also directed the officers concerned to resolve the problems of growers.

Director General Agriculture Hidayatullah Chajro briefed the meeting about preventive measures for locusts.

The participants of the meeting also gave suggestions for the prevention of locusts. Director Agriculture Shaukat Hussain Mastoi informed the meeting about the present situation of Subzi Mandi and other related issues.

Later Talking to media men, the minister said that the locusts had been present in Sindh for one year and couple of days earlier locusts attacked on crops in different parts of Hyderabad Division. He said that the Sindh government was continuously trying hard to prevent locusts. He informed that the different agriculture institutes of the world issued warning of locusts attacks in our region. He said that after Coronavirus the locusts were the biggest problem for Pakistan, the situation would be worsened in coming days, as locusts from Iran and India could attack in our country, he added. He informed that 57 teams were working for preventing locust attacks and now 41 more teams had been added for this purpose. He said that we were trying to make teams ready at taluka level to spray at any time and added that a helpline number had also been given to growers to inform about locusts' attack. Replying a question, he said that there was no conflict of Sindh with the federal government, we just demanded to federal Plant Protection Department for aerial spray.

He said that losses to crops were being estimated and soon details would be issued.

To a question, he said that due to Covid-19 the problems were being faced on wheat procurement but the Sindh government would achieve its target of wheat procurement. Replying another question, he said that due to Coronavirus, the export of mangoes would be affected.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/13/596455/locust-attacks-could-increase-ten-times-this-year-fears-minister/>

72 PERCENT OF WHEAT PROCUREMENT TARGET COMPLETED, CLAIMS MINISTER

By RECORDER REPORT on May 13, 2020

Punjab has achieved 72 percent of the 4.5 million tons of wheat procurement target set for the current year while 92 percent of 'baardana' (gunny bags) have been distributed among the farmers.

Food Minister Abdul Aleem Khan said this while replying to the questions of food department during the current session of Punjab Assembly. He said a coordinated policy has been implemented for the procurement of wheat in Punjab which has tried to bring direct benefits to common farmers. He also said that the government has ensured uninterrupted supply of "baardana" to the farmers all over the province. He said he himself is keeping an eye on wheat procurement drive and making on the spot checking of all the procedure and claimed no complaint has been received in this regard.

The Minister said that Punjab has set a target of purchasing 4.5 million metric tonnes of wheat which will be completed ahead of time. He said the Punjab government would also meet the wheat requirement of KPK by purchasing additional wheat while another 5 lakh metric tonnes is also under consideration for an extraordinary situation.

Aleem Khan assured that people of Punjab will not be facing the shortage of food grains. He claimed that the food department is fulfilling its responsibilities and all necessary steps are being taken to meet the requirements. He also answered various supplementary questions of the food department and informed the session about the steps taken by it for the betterment of this sector.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/13/596449/seven-2-percent-of-wheat-procurement-target-completed-claims-minister/>

90% BAGS FOR COLLECTING WHEAT DISTRIBUTED

By Our Correspondent Published: May 13, 2020

LAHORE: Provincial Senior Minister Abdul Aleem Khan has said that a coordinated policy has been implemented for the procurement of wheat in Punjab while trying to bring direct benefits to the farmers.

Replying to lawmakers' questions about the Food Department in the Punjab Assembly, he added that 72 per cent target of the procurement of wheat has been achieved in Punjab, while the distribution of 92 per cent bags to farmers has been completed for the purpose so far.

The minister said the Punjab government has ensured uninterrupted supply of sacks to the farmers all over the province this year. He told the house that he had inspected the wheat procurement drive and found no complaint on the ground.

He said Punjab has set a target of purchasing 4.5 million tonnes of wheat, which will hopefully be completed ahead of time. He said the Punjab government would also meet the wheat requirement of K-P besides. He said the additional purchase of 500,000 tonnes is also under consideration to meet an extraordinary situation.

The minister said illegal transportation of wheat in Punjab has been strictly curtailed and largescale operations have been carried out against hoarders without any discrimination.

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<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2220247/1-90-bags-collecting-wheat-distributed/>

FLOUR CRISIS FEARED AS PRICE GOES UP

Ali Hazrat Bacha May 14, 2020

PESHAWAR: The price of a 20kg wheat flour bag went up by Rs30 here on Wednesday as the local millers stopped supplies to hundreds of points selling flour in different parts of the provincial capital at subsidised rate.

Flour dealers of the main Rampura Market told Dawn that 20kg bag of mixed quality flour was sold for Rs920-Rs930 in the wholesale level against the previous rate of Rs870-Rs880 and the 20kg fine atta bag at Rs1,000.

The Bara Road wholesalers and retailers were found to have fixed the price at will.

According to the dealers, sales points were set up in different localities to provide flour to people at the controlled price of Rs808 per bag but they're closed at the moment.

They said wheat supply from Punjab had been suspended to the mills of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa leading to the closure of sales points.

Millers insist situation caused by halt to wheat supply from Punjab

The dealers said the flour price had increased in Punjab, where millers continuously demanded increase in wheat quota at the subsidised rate but the government didn't do so.

They added that the dealers of KP, too, had to purchase wheat at high price.

Meanwhile, the Pakistan Flour Mills Association, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, has warned a halt to the grinding of wheat over the suspension of supplies at subsidised rate from the provincial government.

It also feared a severe flour crisis in the province after Eidul Fitr.

“All of our 180 flour mills are to stop the grinding within a couple of days due to ban on wheat supply from Punjab KP flour mills,” association president Haji Mohammad Iqbal told Dawn.

He demanded the lifting of the ban on wheat supply from Punjab to KP to control flour price hike.

Meanwhile, the millers led by Mohammad Naeem Butt and office-bearers of the Sarhad Chamber of Commerce and Industry also held a meeting at the chamber’s offices with SCCI president Engineer Maqsood Anwar Pervaiz in the chair.

They demanded of Chief Minister Mahmood Khan to intervene and ensure the restoration of wheat supply from Punjab to KP.

The millers said the government of Punjab had imposed an ‘unconstitutional’ and ‘unlawful’ ban on wheat transportation to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and that ban was a clear violation of Article 151 of the Constitution.

“Our province is deficient in wheat, so it mostly depends on Punjab to fulfil its needs,” a miller said.

He said wheat supply to local mills from the government’s godowns had come to a halt and that all mills would be closed under the prevailing circumstances as there was no other option to acquire wheat.

The millers said due to the unavailability of wheat on the market, they were unable to continue supplying flour to the markets at the subsidised price, which had led to the fear of flour shortage across the province.

“We had earlier warned the government to take up the wheat ban issue with Sindh, Punjab and federal governments but they paid no attention,” Mr Naeem Butt said.

He added that the entire responsibility rested with the provincial government.

The miller alleged that the current performance of the provincial government, especially food department, in the prevailing circumstances was very disappointing.

Mr Maqsood Pervaiz asked the government to lift the ‘inter-provincial’ ban on wheat supply from Punjab to KP to ensure the timely availability of wheat to local mills and fulfil the requirement of food commodity and avert any flour crisis in the province.

He said the economic and business activities had slowed down due to the prolonged coronavirus-induced lockdown, while the imposition of ban on the transportation of wheat and unavailability of wheat for local mills would lead to the closure of flour industry in the province.

The SCCI chief said the unavailability of wheat for KP flour mills was completely unjust and unbearable and that the ban on wheat transportation should be lifted immediately.

He urged Prime Minister Imran Khan, federal food minister and secretary and other authorities to take an immediate notice of the ‘unconstitutional’ and ‘unlawful’ inter-provincial restrictions on wheat supply and ensure the smooth availability of wheat of KP flour mills.

When contacted, food secretary Nisar Ahmad said the province had a stock of over 35,000 metric tons of wheat in its godowns but that was meant for emergency situation only.

“We regularly provide wheat quota to local mills but now Punjab has stopped supplies due to own requirements, so millers have to arrange wheat privately by themselves,” he said.

The official said the province’s mills had to depend 80 per cent on wheat from Punjab.

“KP markets have flour in sufficient quantity but wheat supply has been stopped by Punjab due to local procurement process,” he said.

The secretary said wheat harvesting had begun in KP, so millers should acquire it to operate mills until the regular supply was made from official godowns.

He said the relevant authorities were well aware of the situation.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556928>

ECC OKAYS RS50BN FOR AGRICULTURE SECTOR

Khaleeq Kiani Updated May 14, 2020

ISLAMABAD: The government on Wednesday approved a Rs50 billion package for the agriculture sector and about Rs17bn additional funds to defence forces to foot extra fuel bills.

The decisions were taken at a meeting of the Economic Coordination Committee (ECC) of the Cabinet, presided over by Finance Adviser Dr Abdul Hafeez Shaikh, that also approved in principle a cell phone assembling policy.

The ECC was given a demand of Rs56.6bn agriculture package to provide the farmers subsidy on fertilisers, reduction in bank mark-up on agriculture loans, subsidy on cotton seed and white fly pesticides and sales tax subsidy on locally manufactured tractors as part Rs100bn earmarked for farmers and small and medium enterprises (SME) out of the Rs1,200bn coronavirus relief package.

However, Shaikh asked the food security ministry to rationalise it to Rs50bn as per its share in the overall Rs100 package announced for the SMEs and the agriculture sector.

He said the ECC had already approved a Rs50bn package for the former to provide indirect cash flow support to nearly 3.5 million people through pre-paid electricity.

Rs17bn set aside for defence forces’ fuel bill

Under the agriculture package, about Rs37bn subsidy would be offered to farmers on the purchase of fertilisers. The amount would include a subsidy of Rs925 per bag on DAP and other phosphatic fertilisers and Rs243 per bag on urea and other nitrogen fertilisers.

The ECC was told that the estimated urea offtake would be around 3.04m tonnes while DAP was estimated at 0.95m tonnes for the Kharif season. The subsidy scheme will be implemented by the provinces and the amount will be disbursed through a scratch card scheme already in place in Punjab.

It was also informed that the fertiliser share in the cost of production for major crops was around 10-15 per cent and the provision of subsidy would increase their affordability to adopt the recommended level of fertiliser nutrient use and best agricultural management practices.

Similarly, under the agriculture package, a reduction in mark-up of agri loans at the total cost of Rs8.8bn, subsidy on cotton seed worth Rs2.3bn and white fly pesticides at Rs6bn were also approved.

Furthermore, the ECC called for inclusion of other banks along with Zarai Taraqati in the scheme to enhance outreach of farmers with focus on subsistence farmers with a land holding of 12.5 acres. It was suggested that since markup had been reduced by the State Bank of Pakistan, the interest rates used in the proposal could also be rationalised accordingly.

The ECC called for the implementation mechanism, especially through the scratch card system, to be monitored carefully to ensure that the actual beneficiaries of the package were genuine farmers.

It was also pointed out that since with the provision of subsidy on fertilisers, their demand might increase, the same had to be communicated to the Ministry of Industries and Production (MoIP) in time to make arrangements accordingly.

The meeting approved a proposal by the Poverty Alleviation & Social Safety Division for disbursement of the Special Relief Package for the population living along the Line of Control in a single installment of Rs12,000 for six months from January-June while from July onwards, those families will be given monthly installments of Rs2,000 each until end of December.

The ECC took up different proposals for technical supplementary grants by various divisions and approved one by the Defence Division for a supplementary grant of Rs16.6bn to meet the expenses on POL, utilities and medical stores of the Defence Services.

In addition, it okayed Rs288m for payment of salaries to the employees of Pakistan Machine Tool Factory for the period from October 2019 to June 2020 and Rs40 million to the law ministry for employee-related costs and operating expenditures of the Federal Judicial Academy.

The ECC also discussed the Mobile Device Manufacturing Policy as proposed by the MoIP with the objectives of technology acquisition and localisation of mobile devices through domestic investment, joint ventures, FDIs, creation of 200,000 direct and indirect jobs, price reduction for consumers, increase in digitisation through supporting 4G/5G technologies, development of efficient manufacturing ecosystem, exports of competitively manufactured handsets and achievement of security objectives.

It deliberated upon various components of the policy and approved in-principle with instructions to the MoIP to further fine-tune its various features and incentives for promoting localisation and research and development leading to export of mobile phones.

Lastly, the ECC gave green signal to the release of 35,000 tonnes of wheat from the Pakistan Agriculture Storage and Services Corporation to the Azad Jammu and Kashmir government at Rs1.52bn, including the cost of wheat and incidental charges, to be paid 50pc by the federal administration from the stimulus package announced to fight against Covid-19.

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UREA SALES DECREASE BY 18PC

The Newspaper's Staff Reporter May 14, 2020

ISLAMABAD: Urea sales dropped by 18 per cent to 240,000 tonnes in April compared to same period last year due to the ongoing coronavirus lockdown and locusts attacks in several parts of the country. Overall, urea sales fell by 12pc against the previous month.

Based on the latest sales data shared by the National Fertiliser Development Centre, the urea market seems to be under significant pressure with the accumulation of 850,000 tonnes inventory due to slowdown and other stress faced by agricultural sector.

The fertiliser industry began the year with an opening inventory of 600,000 tonnes. However, the inventory has continued to soar on the back of highest-ever quarterly production of 1.42 million tonnes by the manufacturers and declining sales volume.

If the same trend continues, the urea inventory could surge to an estimated 1m tonnes by the year-end.

This weakening off-take trend, which is expected to continue for rest of the year as well, points out to supply chain disruptions in the agricultural sector and a general slowdown in economy with the real GDP growth possibly contracting by 1.3pc.

Meanwhile, according to analysts have said that to support the farmers amid the Covid-19 crisis, the government is expected to announce a mega agriculture package of Rs63.8 billion for different agriculture related sectors which are hit by the virus outbreak.

Besides the fallout of Covid-19 pandemic, the urea demand is expected to be adversely affected by record locust infestation that threatens to destroy cotton, wheat, maize and other crops.

As a result, the urea consumption is likely to decline by around 10pc to 5.2m tonnes. This demand can easily be met by the production capacity of indigenous gas-based urea manufacturers, which is estimated to touch around 5.8m tonnes in 2020.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556945/urea-sales-decrease-by-18pc>

KP MILLERS DEMAND LIFTING OF BAN ON WHEAT SUPPLY FROM PUNJAB

By AMJAD ALI SHAH on May 14, 2020

Flour millers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have demanded of the federal government to lift ban on wheat supply from Punjab to ensure timely availability of wheat to local mills and fulfill requirement of food commodity and avert to create flour crisis in the province.

The demand was made by a delegation of flour millers, led by Pakistan Flour Mills Association Khyber Pakhtunkhwa chairman Muhammad Iqbal and group leader, Muhammad Naeem Butt during a meeting with Sarhad Chamber of Commerce and Industry president, Engineer Maqsood Anwer Pervaiz on Wednesday.

The flour millers apprised the meeting that the Government of Punjab had imposed 'unconstitutional' and 'unlawful' ban on wheat transportation to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which was clear contradiction of article 151 of the constitution of the country.

"KP is wheat-deficient province, mostly depending on Punjab to fulfill the food requirement in the province, the millers said. On the other hand, they added that wheat supply was stopped to local mills from government godowns and all mills will be shut down under the prevailing circumstances.

The flour millers said owing to non-availability of wheat in market, they are not able to supply flour to the markets, which has led to fear of shortage of flour across the province.

"We had earlier warned the provincial government to take up the issue of ban on wheat supply with Sindh, Punjab and the federal government, but they paid no attention," Naeem Butt said. He added the entire responsibility now lies on the PTI-led provincial government.

SCCI chief said unavailability of wheat to KP flour mills is completely unjust and unbearable and the ban on wheat transportation should be lifted immediately.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/14/596771/kp-millers-demand-lifting-of-ban-on-wheat-supply-from-punjab/>

NDMA READIES TACKLE LOCUST INFESTATION

OUR CORRESPONDENT May 14, 2020

ISLAMABAD. To avert the impending locust attack, National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) Chairman Lt-Gen Muhammad Afzal on Wednesday said that arrangements have been made for timely land and aerial spray in the stricken regions.

"Around two planes for spraying-out of which one was ordered from Turkey-and five helicopters have been readied to tackle the impending locust attack in the country," he said while addressing a press conference in Islamabad.

Experts have already warned of severe locust attack in the region. "It is predicted that Pakistan and Iran will face the worst desert locust outbreak in 50 year," Iranian Ambassador to Pakistan Seyed Mohammad Ali Hosseini had said in an article titled 'The challenge to food security: a new agenda for regional cooperation'.

Machines have also been installed in the suspected areas, the NDMA chairman said, adding that China has provided spray and sprayers to help Pakistan handle the situation.

Briefing about the relief activities, Lt-Gen Afzal said the government has so far procured over 100,000 tonnes of medical items from China through 11 flights. "To ensure transparency in the buying and delivery of the items all rules were followed," he added. The government had opted to follow the self-reliant approach for making ventilators and other medical equipment after the demand and prices for such items shot up.

"Because of the NDMA efforts, the production of medical items started in local markets," he said, "Today we are buying all the stuff from local markets that saved valuable amount of out funds."

The NDMA chairman said the authority would review the possibility of exporting locally produced medical items after ensuring the availability of 3-4 months of stock.

Lt-

Gen Afzal said: “There is one month of stock available in the NDMA warehouse.”

https://epaper.tribune.com.pk/DisplayDetails.aspx?ENI_ID=11202005140457&EN_ID=11202005140151&EMID=11202005140049

COMMERCE ADVISER TESTIFIES BEFORE SUGAR PROBE COMMISSION

Ishaq Tanoli | Mubarak Zeb Khan Updated May 15, 2020

ISLAMABAD/KARACHI: Adviser to the Prime Minister on Commerce Razak Dawood on Thursday appeared before an inquiry commission investigating a sugar scam and recorded his statement on the decisions taken by the Sugar Advisory Board regarding export of the commodity.

The commission had also summoned Sindh Chief Minister Syed Murad Ali Shah, but he refused to appear before it and said the issue pertained to the province of Punjab.

Mr Dawood is the fifth high-profile figure to appear before the commission looking into the sudden spike in sugar and wheat prices last year. The commission is tasked with issuing a forensic audit report on the 2019 sugar and wheat crises.

Mr Dawood confirmed to Dawn that he appeared before the commission to record his statement, but declined to provide any details. He said he would not talk to the media on the issue.

However, when pressed to share some of the issues raised during the hearing, the premier’s adviser said he would make his position clear on Friday (today). “I will issue a statement on May 15 to clarify my position,” he said.

Mr Dawood’s statement before the commission may be very important given that soon after the release of the first report on the sugar and wheat crises the prime minister took away the portfolio of ministry of industries and production from him and that of ministry of food security from Khusro Bakhtiar. Mr Bakhtiar was later given the portfolio of economic affairs.

Mr Dawood as chairman of the Sugar Advisory Board had proposed to the Economic Coordination Committee (ECC) of the federal cabinet that export of sugar might be allowed. The ECC allowed export of 1.1 million tons of sugar in October and December of 2018.

Out of the total allocation of the quota, only about 750,000 tons of sugar was exported. The average retail price of sugar was Rs53.75 per kilogram in 2017-18, Rs61.43 in 2016-17, Rs64.03 in 2015-16 and Rs58.91 in 2014-15, respectively. The price of sugar increased to about Rs80 per litre when the sugar crisis was at its peak by the end of December 2019.

An increase of Re1 in the price of sugar at the retail level means the net spending of Rs5.1 billion by the consumers. The yearly consumption of sugar in the country is between 5m and 6m tons.

An earlier inquiry report filed by the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) on the crisis had revealed the names of some bigwigs, including Jahangir Tareen, a former secretary general of the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf, and close relatives of leaders of the party’s allies, who had allegedly benefited from the crisis.

However, the government constituted the inquiry commission in the first week of April and asked it to submit a forensic audit report on April 25. This deadline was later extended till May 16.

The inquiry commission headed by the director general of FIA, Wajid Zia, had requested Murad Ali Shah twice to appear before the panel.

In response, Sindh's Advocate General Salman Talibuddin sent a letter to the FIA head on Wednesday, in which he said it was evident from the findings of an inquiry committee that all acts of omission and commission responsible for the alarming increase in the price of sugar were centred in and confined to Punjab.

“Given this, we find it difficult to understand why the government of Sindh is being dragged into the quagmire created by the government of Punjab and is being asked to provide a briefing (on) the years 2017-2018 which cannot conceivably have any bearing on the task assigned to the sugar inquiry commission. For your information, during 2017-2018 the price of sugar (was) actually reduced, at least in the province of Sindh,” the letter contended.

It was evident from the inquiry commission's own report that the Sindh chief minister was not asked to appear before the inquiry committee throughout the period in which it was functioning to brief it on the issue of subsidy granted by the provincial government in 2017-18 on the export of sugar over and above the subsidy allowed by the federal government, the letter said.

It said that nobody from Sindh had featured in the inquiry committee's report as having played any part in or being responsible in any way for causing illegal increase in the price of sugar on account of the events that took place exclusively in Punjab.

“It is clear from the report of inquiry committee as well as the contents of DG FIA's letter dated March 16 that all matters falling within paragraph 3(k) of the terms of reference have been inquired into and findings in respect of them have been given and all that has been recommended now (is) the conduct of verification of the source reports through forensic audit and physical stock-taking of a few of the mills identified in the committee's report,” it added.

The provincial law officer in the letter further contended that asking the chief minister to appear before the commission did not fall within its terms of reference set out in the interior ministry's notification issued on March 16. The message asked the FIA chief to immediately withdraw his letters issued on May 11 and 13 on the subject.

Published in Dawn, May 15th, 2020

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1557205>

SMUGGLING, HOARDING POSE THREAT TO FOOD SECURITY: PM IMRAN

By Rizwan Shehzad Published: May 15, 2020

ISLAMABAD: Prime Minister Imran Khan was on Thursday informed of the various measures taken to make the recently promulgated anti-smuggling ordinance more effective.

While chairing a high-level meeting on smuggling, hoarding and profiteering, the premier was told that the ordinance takes stricter measures against elements involved in smuggling of currency and essential commodities.

The meeting was informed that law enforcement agencies had been empowered to take action against smuggling within five kilometres of borders and at airports. The new law also authorised relevant law enforcement agencies to take into custody elements involved in trafficking.

Further, coordination had been improved between district administration, customs officials, security agencies and law enforcement agencies so as to ensure effective prevention of smuggling.

The chairperson of the Federal Board of Revenue briefed the meeting on the steps taken thus far after the implementation of the Anti-Smuggling Ordinance.

The meeting was informed that provincial chief secretaries had been given a detailed briefing on measures to curb smuggling.

Addressing the meeting, the prime minister said that smuggling was a menace to the country's economy. He said that smuggling harms the national economy in two ways. Firstly, it poses a threat to the country's food security causing the public to suffer because of a shortage of basic necessities.

Secondly, said the PM, smuggling causes irreparable damage to the country's industries, that hampers industrial process.

He said there would be no concession or compromise on the action against smuggling.

The prime minister directed all relevant departments to submit reports on the prevention of smuggling and action taken against those involved in the act after every 15 days so that progress in this regard may be continuously monitored.

The provincial chief secretaries apprised Khan on the situation of wheat production, harvesting and overall situation.

The meeting also reviewed the prices of basic commodities, and the provincial chief secretaries also briefed the prime minister in detail about the steps taken to bring down these prices.

Reports on action taken against hoarders and profiteers by the provincial governments was also presented to the prime minister.

Minister for Industry Hamad Azhar briefed the meeting on the efforts being taken to bring down the prices of cement, steel, cooking oil and other essential items.

While directing the provincial authorities regarding possible steps to bring down the prices of basic necessities, the PM said that reducing the prices of petrol, especially diesel, by the government was to provide relief to the people.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2221423/1-smuggling-hoarding-pose-threat-food-security-pm-khan/>

FLOUR MILLERS BEGIN NATIONWIDE STRIKE TODAY

The Newspaper's Correspondent May 17, 2020

TAXILA: The All Pakistan Flour Mills Association (APFMA) has announced a nationwide strike starting today (Sunday) to protest the food department and government's behaviour towards millers, which they say violate the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between millers and the food department.

The association's vice chairman Sheikh Mohammad Saeed and other office-bearers from Punjab told media on Saturday that their mills were being raided, they were being threatened of registration of cases and imposition of fines and were not being allowed to hold wheat for grinding.

Mr Saeed said the central body of the association has called a strike, and millers across the province will stop grinding and supplying flour to markets starting Sunday until the relevant departments assure them they will not raid mills unnecessarily, and that they will allow wheat stock to be held for 72 hours for washing and grinding.

He said that the suspension of the flour supply would hit the public hard in Ramazan if the government does not address millers' grievances.

"Flour millers have given the government and food department adequate time to procure wheat from growers, but the step-motherly attitude of the administration and food department officials is uncalled for, as they are conducting raids in various districts across Punjab and not allowing even 200 bags of wheat to be held for washing and grinding," he said.

Mr Saeed said flour millers have holding rights to store an adequate stock of wheat, but government functionaries not only confiscate the wheat but also book millers in cases, in violation of the MoU between flour millers and the government.

Sheikh Zeeshan, a member of the Punjab association, said: "We have taken the decision after receiving directions from office bearers of the central executive committee of the association to go on strike from Sunday."

He added: "This is not a token protest, but a complete shutdown until the demands are met by concerned government departments."

Published in Dawn, May 17th, 2020

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1557640/flour-millers-begin-nationwide-strike-today>

IMPENDING LOCUST ATTACK ON COTTON

By RECORDER REPORT on May 17, 2020

Impending locust attack on cotton is making cotton growers worry that if the preventive measures will not be taken, this year cotton yield will be low as compared to previous years. The growers of Matiari, Bhtishah, Hala and other surrounding areas of Hyderabad city are under the threat of locust attack.

The agriculture experts and civil society activists are demanding timely measures to counter locust threat. They said that it is another emergency situation for the province much like Covid-19 pandemic. This needs urgent attention for fumigation campaigns against the locust attack.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/17/597740/impending-locust-attack-on-cotton/>

SUDAN INFLATION SOARS TO 99PC AS FOOD PRICES RISE

By Agence France-Press on May 16, 2020

Soaring inflation, a scarcity of foreign currency and a huge public debt are among the country's most pressing challenges.

KHARTOUM: Inflation in Sudan jumped to 99 percent because of rising food prices, official figures showed Saturday, more than a year after the country was rocked by protests sparked by bread price hikes.

The inflation rate in April shot up from 82 percent the previous month due to increased prices of grains, meat, milk and bread, according to the Sudanese Central Bureau of Statistics.

Despite Sudan's political transition, which has raised hopes of more reforms, the economy remains in deep crisis.

Soaring inflation, a scarcity of foreign currency and a huge public debt are among the country's most pressing challenges.

Many in Sudan still have to queue for hours to buy bread.

A tripling of the price of bread was the trigger for the first street protests against long-time autocrat Omar al-Bashir in December 2018.

The mass demonstrations went on for months before the army deposed Bashir on April 11, 2019.

Last month, Sudanese authorities announced an increase in bread prices, meaning one Sudanese pound (about two US cents) now buys only a 50-gram loaf of bread, compared to one weighing 70 grams previously.

<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/16/597650/sudan-inflation-soars-to-99pc-as-food-prices-rise/>

SURGING LOCUST ATTACKS POSE GREAT THREAT TO FOOD SECURITY

By Agencies Published: May 17, 2020

While the government and the urban population are struggling against the speedily spreading Covid-19, farmers in Pakistan's main food-producing pockets have been haunted by a plague of locust swarms which are sweeping green fields with their devastating instinct to eat heavily.

Locust swarms triggered panic among villagers in Punjab as their crop was fine one evening but a lot of leaves had been eaten up a day later. They fear that if the situation prevails it would finish all cash crops, animals' fodders and fruits like it did with wheat crop in Sindh.

The desert locust plague affected Pakistan's southern Sindh province last year before moving to the rest parts of the country. The Ministry of National Food Security and Plant Protection and other departments all came up with a response to the fly attacks.

Assistant Director of Agriculture Pest Warning in Chakwal district Muhammad Riaz told Xinhua that the swarm, scattered in two groups, had affected around 400 acres crops in less than 48 hours, posing a big threat to crops in the area.

According to the food security ministry, the locusts has imposed a loss of 15% to the winter-sown crops last year amounting to at least Rs100 billion, with fears that the damage would be huge if the next generation hatched.

The report added that the locust attacks could cause Rs817 billion loss to the country's agriculture production in 2020. The United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization estimates agricultural losses to Pakistan from locusts could be as high as \$2.2 billion for winter crops alone.

Earlier in January, the government imposed a national emergency on locust control. This week, the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) said the department has planned to spray 500,000-hectare land because the numbers of locusts are increasing earlier and speedily.

The FAO said in its latest update that adult groups were migrating to the Indian border from breeding areas in Balochistan and the Indus Valley where hopper groups had been present as well as in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

It added the situation was also threatening in Iran where hopper bands are maturing along the southwestern coastal plains and another generation of breeding was underway on the coast near Jask and in the interior of Sistan-Balochistan province, which borders Pakistan.

In India, more adult groups and small swarms arrived from Pakistan in the past few days and moved east into Rajasthan, reaching Jodhpur. Some swarms could continue further east. Control operations are underway in all three countries.

The Iranian media quoted an agricultural ministry official as saying that Tehran might use the military for a second year to help fight locusts in the south of the country, as the swarms threaten to destroy crops worth more than \$7 billion.

Mohammad Reza Mir, a spokesman for the ministry's Plant Protection Organisation (PPO), said this week that the desert locusts had attacked more than 494,000 acres of orchards and farmland in seven of Iran's 31 provinces, the semi-official news agency ILNA reported.

The affected areas, stretching from eastern Iran on the border with Pakistan to the southwestern border with Iraq, were likely to soon increase to 1 million hectares, Mir told ILNA. "The military have promised to help fight the desert locusts, including by providing all-terrain vehicles for use in areas which are hard to access," Mir told ILNA.

PPO's head, Mohammad Reza Dargahi, said last month that locust swarms threatened 1,250 trillion rials (\$7.4 billion) worth of agricultural products across six provinces in southern Iran, the daily Financial Tribune reported.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2223232/1-surging-locust-attacks-pose-great-threat-food-security/>

PUNJAB'S AGGRESSIVE WHEAT POLICY RILES UP MILL OWNERS

By Aamir Naveed Published: May 17, 2020

LAHORE: While flour mills have increased the prices of their product due to non-availability of wheat at official rates, the food department has adopted an aggressive strategy to meet the procurement target.

However, the Flour Mills Association has announced a strike in Punjab against raids on mills by the Food Department.

Pakistan Flour Mills Association's Central Chairperson Asim Raza, while talking to The Express Tribune, said that the staff of food department is harassing the owners and conducting raids on mills.

The department has allowed mills to store wheat for 72 hours of threshing but they do not even have wheat for 48 hours of threshing. Despite this, the district administration and food department officials are raiding the mills and picking up wheat.

He maintained that the officers of the food department are unnecessarily harassing the owners of flour mills to achieve their target.

He also said that wheat purchased from other parts of the province is not being allowed to reach Lahore. Raza said raids were carried out on flour mills in Multan, Dera Ghazi Khan, Sargodha, Gujrat and other areas and cases were being registered against the owners.

He alleged that after entering a mills in Sargodha, officials had asked the management to buy 50,000 sacks of wheat. Similarly, vehicles carrying wheat were being seized at the gates of mills in DG Khan. All the mills in Sargodha have been closed for the last three days.

Raza said flour mills in Sindh were buying wheat freely and also storing it, but those in Punjab were not allowed to buy wheat.

He said the provincial food department was trying to achieve its target by harassing mill owners, which was not possible. He said the owners had decided to close the mills in Punjab.

The mills have increased flour prices by up to Rs2 per kilogramme. The price of a 20kg bag of flour has gone up from Rs805 to Rs825 and that of a 10kg bag from Rs400 to Rs420.

Punjab Flour Mills Association Chairperson Abdul Rauf Mukhtar, while talking to The Express Tribune, said that per maund price of wheat in the open market had increased by more than Rs100.

The government is not releasing wheat and owners are buying wheat from the open market. At present, the per maund price of wheat in the markets is about Rs1,500.

He said flour mills are buying expensive wheat and providing cheap flour to the people. Therefore, an increase in prices was inevitable.

According to sources, the Punjab Food Department had set a target of purchasing 4.5 million metric tonnes of wheat but so far only 3.5 million tonnes has been procured.

Thus, the food department is facing a shortfall of one million tonnes in the procurement. The procurement of wheat is to be completed by the first week of June. The procurement season is coming to an end but the food department does not have time to meet the target due to the coming Eidul Fitr holidays.

Published in The Express Tribune, May 17th, 2020.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2223107/1-punjabs-aggressive-wheat-policy-riles-mill-owners/>

PAKISTAN GETS BIG SHARE IN RICE MARKETS

By APP Published: May 17, 2020

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan has attained a huge space in the global rice market for exporting local rice in potential markets of Middle East, North America and African regions to achieve the target of increasing the agricultural exports, said Adviser to Prime Minister on Commerce Abdul Razak Dawood.

Talking to APP on Saturday, he said that the government intended to uplift exports to their highest level ever and for that purpose, it was taking different measures to reclaim traditional markets besides accessing new ones.

He added that a rice delegation from Mexico would hopefully arrive in Pakistan in June to appraise various rice exporters to attain permission for exporting rice to Mexico.

The adviser said the all members of the Rice Exports Association Pakistan (REAP) should prepare themselves for this opportunity so that maximum exporters could receive approvals for orders in the Mexican market.

Dawood said that rice was the largest agri-export commodity in the country's export basket with a total value of over \$2 billion, which would be increased to \$5 billion in the next five years.

He urged the local rice exporters to introduce new varieties by investing in research and development to enhance production and quality.

Replying to a question, he said that even in the current critical situation, the country's food exports to the Middle Eastern market, especially meat and poultry, have increased compared to the same period of previous year.

Replying to another question, he stressed the need for making preparations to exploit the economic and trade opportunities expected to emerge post Covid-19 pandemic.

"We expect more opportunities to promote bilateral trade and strengthen linkages with potential markets including European Union, China, Middle East and African region besides promoting regional trade in post pandemic environment," he said.

He underlined that the pandemic would bring a paradigm shift and will create great opportunities, adding that the coronavirus had changed the world and now the business processes would be completely different.

Dawood said that the government was focusing equally on all sectors of the economy including textile, non-textile and agriculture and engineering sectors to build export potential of the country in coming months.

Talking about the external trade situation during the past three months, he said exports had declined in April 2020 by around 54% compared to the same month of last year and the reason behind the decline was obviously the spread of coronavirus across the world.

Dawood said that the government was prioritising 'Made in Pakistan' policy to boost local production and reduce dependence on import and enhance exports.

Published in The Express Tribune, May 17th, 2020.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2223039/2-pakistan-gets-big-share-rice-markets/>

NEWS COVERAGE PERIOD FROM MAY 11TH TO 17TH

DIESEL SHORTAGE, POL PRICES CUT MAY HAMPER WHEAT HARVESTING

Amjad Mahmood May 11, 2020

LAHORE: There seems to be no let-up in the miseries of the farmers as the authorities remain apathetic to the diesel shortage being faced by them in the middle of the wheat harvesting season.

Reports of unavailability of diesel in the market had started doing rounds a couple of days after downward revision of the rates of petroleum products on April 30 in line with the sharp decline in their prices in the world market.

Almost all oil marketing companies stopped placing orders with the international suppliers as soon as the Oil and Gas Regulatory Authority (Ogra) hinted at proposing a cut in oil prices.

Already suffering because of shortage of labour due to Covid-19 lockdown, wheat growers are facing another unexpected crisis amid the harvesting season in the form of unavailability of diesel to run their tractors and threshing machines. This may lead to delay in harvesting.

Farmers riding their tractor-trolleys and pick-ups carrying barrels and jerry cans can be seen queuing up at the filling stations to get diesel, particularly in Bhakkar, Layyah and Mianwali districts of Punjab. In most cases, they return empty-handed or get a few litres of diesel.

“At a time when I should have been in my lands to oversee wheat harvesting, I’m forced to line up at petrol pumps to get diesel for my tractor-run thresher,” laments Rana Haider, a farmer from Thal area in Bhakkar.

Talking to Dawn by phone, he says that he has lost his three precious days in search of diesel but failed to find the product and he is paying rent for the threshing machine without using it.

Saeed Baloch, a petrol pump owner in Mianwali, claims the oil marketing companies have introduced quota regimes since April 30 for the first time on the basis of average calculated on the yearly basis and thus are providing them one-fourth of the supplies against the demand.

The companies are also delaying the supplies contrary to their normal routines, he alleges, explaining that he would get oil supply the next day of placing the order. But, since the recent cut in prices, this gap between placement of order and supplies has widened to the minimum four days, creating a severe shortage particularly of diesel, he adds.

He wonders why the government didn’t manage the situation while the state-run Pakistan State Oil had flagged the issued in the first week of May.

An official of the PSO Lahore region alleges that the private oil marketing companies (OMCs) are not supplying petroleum products to their respective dealers and thus the whole pressure has been diverted to the PSO outlets. He says that his entity is supplying one million litres of diesel daily only in Lahore region to meet the wheat harvesting-related demand.

A petroleum dealer, Rehmat Khan Wardag, says OMCs have not placed orders for the import of petroleum products since the recent cut in oil prices. He says the OMCs suffered billions of rupees losses in the process and fears that the volatile situation in the world markets will keep them away from the business in coming weeks, which may lead to severe shortage of oil, particularly diesel, in the local market.

He has urged the government to import oil on its own without delay to fend off the hovering shortage that may plunge the sectors dependent on diesel, particularly the agriculture sector, into a severe crisis.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556190>

FOOD OFFICIAL MANHANDLED BY TOWN COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN FOR INTERCEPTING WHEAT STOCK

Dawn Report May 11, 2020

UMERKOT: Harassment and manhandling of a food department official by Samaro town committee chairman late on Saturday evening sent a wave of anger among food officials across the town. An emergency meeting of senior food officials was held on Sunday to condemn the incident.

It was gathered that food inspector Iftikhar Arain, along with a police team, intercepted a consignment of 1,200 wheat bags of 40-kg each while it was being transported by two trucks to some other district. The action was taken as part of the ongoing campaign against hoarding/illegal movement of wheat stocks which was causing an artificial shortage of the commodity and wheat flour in the province.

According to Mr Arain, when he impounded one truck-load of wheat and chased the other truck, Samaro town committee chairman, Rafique Ahmed Qaimkhani, who belonged to the ruling Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), along with some other persons intervened and harassed him to deter him from discharging his official duty. "Qaimkhani abused and held me hostage for some time and then slapped me when I did not agree to come to his terms," alleged Mr Arain.

He said he intended to recover more than 14,000 other wheat bags hoarded in his area of operation to prevent the stocks from being shifted to some other district/province in violation of the relevant ban imposed by the provincial government.

Escorted by a police force, the officials recovered more than 1,00,000 wheat bags and sealed off the mills.

Reacting angrily to the incident, senior food officials held a meeting under the chairmanship of Mohammed Hussain Mahar to discuss the issue. Ghulam Nabi Soomro, Iftikhar Arain and other senior officials including heads of all procurement centres in the district attended the meeting.

The meeting condemned the town committee chairman's act of hooliganism as unacceptable. It said Qaimkhani's attempt of obstructing the food official from performing his duty was unlawful. Appropriate action must be taken against him and those who accompanied him in this unlawful act, it added.

The meeting participants said no one was above the law and, as such, could not be allowed to stop any official from performing duty in line with the orders issued by government.

They resolved to stop performing their official duties pertaining to wheat procurement if action was not taken against the offenders.

SUKKUR: Raids were conducted in three flour mills in the Salehpat town as the drive against hoarders of wheat continued in Sukkur district, food officials said on Saturday.

In Jacobabad, district food controller Asghar Soomro along with Assistant Commissioner of Garhi Khero Sanaullah Bhatti carried out a raid on a rice mill in Dao Jahanpur on the orders of Deputy Commissioner Ghazanfar Ali Qadri.

NAUSHAHRO FEROUZE: District food controller Qareebullah Soomro said on Saturday that around 145,500 wheat bags were recovered in raids on several godowns in grain markets of Bhiriya Road, Kandiaro, Mehrabpur and Khan Wahan towns.

The raiding team found more than 20,000 wheat bags clandestinely stocked there. The stocks were seized and the rice mill was sealed, the officials said.

He told local reporters around 40,000 wheat bags were recovered in Khan Wahen, 35,000 in Mehrabpur, 11,500 in Kandiaro and 60,000 in Bhiriya Road.

All the godowns were sealed, he added.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556097/food-official-manhandled-by-town-committee-chairman-for-intercepting-wheat-stock>

SUKKUR NAB READIES FOUR REFERENCES ON WHEAT SCAM

The Newspaper's Correspondent May 11, 2020

SUKKUR: The Sukkur region of the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) has prepared four references concerning misappropriation of billions of rupees worth of wheat in food department and is ready to file them in accountability court, according to sources.

Sources in the NAB said the references would be filed after seeking formal approval of the bureau's chairman. In this connection, a meeting of NAB's regional board presided over by its Sukkur director general reviewed the scam in Sukkur, Larkana and Shaheed Benazirabad divisions and accorded approval to the references prepared against the corrupt officials of food department.

The sources said the NAB chairman himself had issued directives to file the references over growing complaints about large-scale corruption in food department in different districts of the province.

The sources said that a reference accused deputy director food Anees-ur-Rehman Mahar, district food controller Mohammad Iqbal Memon and others of Rs128 million corruption and another reference blamed Khairpur district food controller Mohammad Ali Ujjan and others of more than Rs58m graft in the stored grain.

The third reference accused Larkana district food controller Zahid Ali Unnar and others of Rs870m corruption and the fourth blamed Kandhkot-Kashmore's deputy director of food Fazal Mohammad Bhangwar and others of more than Rs74m graft.

Published in Dawn, May 11th, 2020

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556096/sukkur-nab-readies-four-references-on-wheat-scam>

IT'S A SEASON OF MANGOES AND COVID-19

Mohammad Hussain Khan May 11, 2020

THE season of the king of fruits — mangoes — has started. But this year, it starts amidst serious concerns of coronavirus spreading in Sindh's rural areas since thousands of labourers arrive from South Punjab, mainly Muzaffargarh. Under the current circumstances, allowing them to enter Sindh is risky since this may allow the contagion to spread in rural areas which, by and large, have remained safe compared with urban areas.

To harvest mangoes, big orchard owners let out their farms to contractors. Punjab's labourers – hired by the orchard contractors – have begun to arrive in Sindh's mango farms, which are larger, through different means of transport, while consignments from these farms have started reaching Punjab.

Till May 7, the Sindh government was debating standard operating procedures (SOPs) to let these workers enter the province. Draft SOPs have been presented to the Sindh government by Sharjeel Inam Memon, an orchard owner who is a Sindh Assembly member from Hyderabad's rural area. He had raised this issue of Punjab's labourers with the government as they turned up in thousands.

"I have discussed SOPs with the Sindh chief minister and he has not yet finalised them. We are trying to see the situation is handled adroitly," says Mr Memon, an influential member of Sindh's ruling party.

Among other measures, the 11-point draft recommends that growers/contractors provide a list of workers from other provinces. It also states enrollment forms will have to be filled and submitted before revenue officials within five working days of labourers commencing work. Items such as gloves, masks and hand sanitisers have to be provided to those working along the entire mango value chain.

Every grower has to try to engage the maximum number of local labourers and minimise hiring from elsewhere for plucking and packing purposes. If a worker develops Covid-19 symptoms, he has to be sent for a checkup. A proforma has to be filled by each worker for tracking and tracing purposes.

'There is no rocket science involved which would prevent local labour from learning to pluck or pack mangoes. Previously, nobody thought of departing from the conventional practice of labour coming in from Punjab to Sindh because there was no reason for it'

The Sindh government is continuously resisting pressure from the PTI-led federal government, as well as the business community, to ease the lockdown. The chief minister had even differed, rightly so, with the 20-point SOPs mutually agreed between the ulema and President Arif Alvi on Taraweeh prayers in Ramazan to stem the spread of the contagion. He feared the SOPs will not be implementable therefore sought to restrict prayer congregations.

Currently, Sindh health officials dealing with the Covid-19 situation and pandemic trajectory believe May is going to be tough from the point of view of a spike in the number of cases. "We are bracing for an exponential rise in cases if the lockdown is eased," observes a Sindh health official associated with monitoring the Covid-19 situation. "The impact of the decision taken for opening up of businesses will be seen after a fortnight," he asserted.

Labourers have already started to arrive unchecked in Sindh from Punjab where an upward trend in the number of cases can be seen, and more are on their way. It is a foregone conclusion that the SOPs specific to mango workers will not be doable, any more than those that were drafted for prayer congregations.

"I think this is an opportunity that can bring local labourers forward and help overcome unemployment currently seen in the pandemic's backdrop," says Sindh agriculture minister Ismail Rahu, who is the son of hari leader Fazil Rahu. The real issue, he opines, pertains to big farms that are let out to contractors who hire workers from Punjab. "One expert worker brought from Punjab for each farm should be enough, the rest should be purely local labourers to handle the mango crop this season. This is how they will get trained as well," he remarks.

The issue of workers from Punjab coming to Sindh has surfaced for the first time because of the pandemic, otherwise, it was conventional practice for orchard owners and contractors. Locally known as bharawa and thukawa, labour from Punjab has picked, sorted and packed mangoes with dexterity for years.

The contractors' argument is since available local labour is not trained, engaging them would cause mango wastage and result in monetary losses. Therefore, this issue is more of contractors than of orchard owners.

Labour from Punjab arrives in groups of 40-50 people. Depending on the size of an orchard, multiple teams work together, switching from one farm to another if need be. They stay at farms and leave once the season is finished, awaiting the arrival of kinnow season in Punjab.

“There is no rocket science involved which would prevent local labour from learning to pluck or pack mangoes. Nobody thought of departing from conventional practice before because there was no reason for it,” remarks Sindh Abadgar Board vice president Mahmood Nawaz Shah, who is also an owner of mango orchards and an exporter. To quote a medium-sized mango grower Nadeem Shah, Punjab's labour is cheap as well as trained.

The Sindh government remained worried till all the men from Tableeghi Jamaat – who became virus carriers in the province in March – recovered and were repatriated home. The government's efforts to ensure safe transportation was praised. Given its lockdown policy, it is unlikely that the Murad Shah-led government will have two different standards relating to the same emergency.

While things are challenging this year, it is an opportunity to engage local labour so that they get trained and there is less reliance on workers from another province next season. It would not be difficult for the locals to learn the art of sorting and plucking since they work in the fields all year round. Is saving mangoes more important than saving lives?

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556252/its-a-season-of-mangoes-and-covid-19>

AGRICULTURAL HARDSHIP UNDER LOCKDOWN

Amjad Mahmood Updated May 11, 2020

THE agriculture sector is facing one of its biggest crises. On one hand, erratic weather and the resultant untimely heavy rains and hailstorms, coupled with the locust attack, are making it hard for farmers to sleep at night. On the other hand, the lockdown since mid-March has created many challenges and negatively impacted the rural population in general and small farm holders in particular.

The prolonged shutdown across the country has not only reduced on-farms activities but also disturbed the transport and sale of crops, vegetables and fruits, as well as the purchase of farm inputs.

Livestock, the most important sub-sector which contributes around 60 per cent of agriculture's share to GDP, is the major victim of the Covid-19 outbreak. To meet their day-to-day expenses, small farmers rear milch cattle and sell the milk. Closure of tea-stalls, sweets shops and the reduced timing for milk shops under the lockdown's standard operating procedures (SOPs) shrank demand for this highly perishable commodity and thus cut its rates.

Salahuddin, a smallholder farmer from Narang Mandi town near Lahore, says he gets 72 litres of milk from his nine buffaloes. Before the lockdown, the milkman would give him Rs80 per litre but now is not willing to buy at even Rs50 per litre citing hurdles in the onward sale because of virus issues. Likewise, owner of a known sweet shop in Mian Channu (Khanewal) has his own dairy farm but since he is disallowed to open his business because of the lockdown, he is forced to sell milk at Rs40 per litre in the town, says Pakistan Kissan Ittehad general secretary Mian Umair, who belongs to the area.

Some dairy farmers are turning towards value addition in the form of mozzarella cheese and ghee to prolong milk's shelf life rather than sell it at throwaway prices

Initially suffering at the hands of the milkman, Mr Salahuddin is now trying to find a solution through value addition: he is preparing (mozzarella quality) cheese and trying to sell it online. Even if he doesn't manage to find buyers, this will enhance the shelf life of the milk. Similarly, some dairy farmers are making desi ghee out of milk instead of selling the commodity at throwaway prices.

Closure of hotels and the ban on weddings and parties is also hurting the once thriving poultry sector. Vegetables are also being sold at low rates in the wholesale market though end consumers are not benefitting from the low prices as the middlemen are making a killer profit.

"The first month of the lockdown was particularly difficult for farmers as delinked from the markets, they had to sell their dairy and farm products at throwaway prices," says Farooq Tariq, general secretary of Pakistan Kissan Rabita Committee, a representative of smallholder farmers. "Those engaged in producing horticulture, floriculture and dairy farming were shattered with the losses for being forced to market their commodities at whatever rate offered in the local bazaar."

Hanf Hanjra, a horticulturist from Sargodha, says previously he earned a good living during the wedding and Ramazan seasons by dispatching his produce to big markets like Lahore and Gujranwala. "However, this time I'm hardly able to meet my expenses because I'm forced to sell my farm produce in the local market at much lower rates as either transport to far-off markets is not available or its charges are unaffordable." He claims he could not once cover transport charges even for the Sargodha market where his four maunds (around 160kg) of coriander was sold for just Rs70 in wholesale.

Unfortunately, the harvesting season of wheat, politically the most important crop, has also fallen in this time of social distancing. The already scarce manual labour has been further reduced because of mobility issues in the wake of the pandemic. And this gap in demand and supply has pushed up wages of available farmworkers.

"Labour is costlier this year as workers face problems crossing police check-posts erected to curtail the movement of people," says Mian Umair. Previously, he would pay 160kg per acre of wheat to a worker for reaping his crop and now this rate has gone up to 210kg per acre. Facing issues trying to convince the mostly illiterate labour force to observe social distancing rules, he says he had to hire manpower from as far as Kasur district, more than 200km away from Mian Channu.

The farming sector was also hit because of difficulties in obtaining inputs and the shutdown of agriculture-engineering and allied industries. Though the government has permitted auto workshops to function when the wheat harvesting season sets in, the decision to allow shops of lath machines, spare parts, etc came a bit late in the day and farmers could not get their tractors, tube-wells and allied machines repaired in time. There were also difficulties in procuring medicine for cattle, bemoans Mr Salah.

Mr Tariq regrets that small farmers, one of the hardest-hit class by the lockdown, are not being considered for compensation by the government. He fears that this will lead to the compounding of rural poverty, disabling particularly the landless farmers from the purchase of seed and other farm inputs for the next crop.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556251>

QCCI BACKS FLOUR MILLERS' DEMAND

CORRESPONDENT May 11, 2020

QUETTA. Quetta Chamber of Commerce and Industry backed Pakistan Flour Mills Association's demand of lifting inter-district ban on the transportation of wheat in the name of coronavirus lockdown. "Section 144 is imposed across Balochistan to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

However, the ban on inter-district transportation on wheat could cause food shortage in the province," said QCCI Senior Vice President Badaruddin Kakar in a statement issued on Saturday. Kakar accused the provincial government and food department of deliberately causing wheat turmoil in Balochistan to ruin the provincial flour mill industry.

"Naseerabad, Jhal Magsi and Jaffar districts fulfill wheat requirements of other districts of the province. Despite the fact, Balochistan government making any policy and strategy," said the QCCI senior vice president in the statement.

He alleged the provincial government for attempting to create wheat shortage to increase flour prices across the province. Criticising wheat procurement policy of the government, Kakar said, "Balochistan produces 80 to 90 million sacks of wheat in a year but the government announced to procure only one million sacks which will ruin the flour mills business in the province.

https://epaper.tribune.com.pk/DisplayDetails.aspx?ENI_ID=11202005110209&EN_ID=11202005110063&EMID=11202005110030

PAKISTAN'S SUGAR POLICY NEEDS REFORMS

By HARI LOHANO Published: May 11, 2020

KARACHI: In the midst of the coronavirus crisis, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government has released the probe commission report on the misuse of sugar and wheat subsidies in the country.

The report shows the power and influence of sugar barons in relation to the country's policy-making. Most of the names mentioned in the report are close associates of the PM, the PTI and the ministers in the government.

PM Imran deserves much credit for the release of the report. He has promised to take decisive action after the probe commission submits its final recommendations.

Findings of the report raise crucial questions about the government's sugar policy and the transparency of its economic policy. How does the sugar policy work? How sugar subsidy benefits only the sugar industry?

Sugarcane is a high-value, rich farmer's crop due its special characteristics. Its per-acre expenses are much higher than any other cash crop.

The time from planting to harvesting is longer. Its marketing chain, from buying seed to arranging tractor trollies for transporting it to sugar mills, negotiating price and finally getting payment, involves very lengthy processes. This favours the rich and better-off farmers as against the cash-starved small landowners.

Pakistan is among the top 10 sugarcane producing countries in the world, with plantations over a million hectares. Sugarcane production accounts for nearly two-thirds of the area in Punjab and a quarter in Sindh.

It uses more of the subsidised agricultural inputs, especially fertiliser and water, than any other crop in the economy. In a highly water-stressed country like Pakistan, sugarcane uses a much higher quantity of water than any other crop.

Between 2013-14 and 2017-18, according to the Economic Survey of Pakistan, the production of sugarcane increased by an impressive 24%, from 67 to 83 million tonnes.

During this period, the area where sugarcane was cultivated increased by 14% from 1.17 to 1.34 million hectares. The average yield per hectare, rising from 57 to 62 tonnes, shows an increase of only 8%.

The area under sugarcane cultivation in Pakistan is the fifth largest in the world after Brazil, India, China and Thailand. Its per-hectare yield, however, is much lower than the other major producers.

Its yield of 62 tonnes per hectare in 2018 was well below the world average of 73 tonnes and even below India's yield of 80 tonnes.

Figures for last year's crop (2018-19), compared with the average performance of crops in the previous five years, showed a decline of 9% in sugarcane cultivation and 6% in production. This decline is mainly attributed to late payments to farmers, shortage of water and an uncertain political environment during the 2018 election.

As in production, Pakistan is among the top 10 countries in consumption of sugar in the world and the biggest consumer of sugar in South Asia. Consumption of sugar is over 25 kg per person per year in Pakistan. In India, it is 20 kg and in China 11 kg.

Pakistan has 89 sugar mills, a much higher number than needed for domestic requirement. Some of these are located in regions where they are economically unviable and environmentally unsuitable.

Most of these mills are owned by very influential and powerful families. They belong to the governing party, the main opposition parties and the families of former generals.

At the time of Independence in 1947, there were only two sugar mills in the country. Until 1970, there were only four.

The mushroom growth of the mills was mainly during General Zia's period of office (1977-1988), when state patronage was provided to create a new business and political class to counter political opposition to his dictatorial rule. Since then, all the major political parties have followed this path and expanded it.

This growth of the sugar industry has had a very adverse effect on the country's other climatically suitable cash crop, cotton, which has been the backbone of the agriculture sector and a major source of foreign currency reserves for the country.

Between 2013-14 and 2017-18, the area under cotton cultivation declined by 4% and its production by 6%. More strikingly, when 2018-19 is compared with the average performance of the crop in the previous five years, its cultivation area has declined by 17% and production fell by two million bales or 20%.

The pricing policy for sugarcane and sugar is based on government intervention in the market through huge public subsidies, direct and indirect, at various levels of production and sale of the commodity.

At the time of harvesting the crop, the government announces a guaranteed minimum price for sugarcane, to encourage farmers to increase the area under cultivation. The government even decides about the movement of the crop – to ensure that sugar mill owners receive plenty of the produce to keep their business viable.

To protect the sugar industry further, the government imposes higher tariffs on sugar imports to “stabilise” prices in the domestic market. In general, the domestic price for sugar remains much higher than the average world price.

In addition, the government provides an export subsidy on sugar in the name of increasing foreign currency reserves.

The government’s decision in September 2018 to allow export of sugar, despite early indications of low production in the country, was a continuation of past public policy to protect the industry.

Pakistan exported 0.4 million tonnes of sugar in 2016-17 and 1.6 million tonnes in 2017-18. Moreover, in 2017, during the period of Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) government, the sugar export quota was increased from 0.5 to 2 million tonnes.

There are two prices for refined sugar in the domestic market. One is the ex-mill price, which is the wholesale price at which the mill sells its product to traders and shopkeepers. The other is the retail price of sugar sold to customers at local corner shops and supermarkets – the price paid by common consumers.

The decision to export the commodity caused a hike in both these prices. The ex-mill price increased from Rs52 to Rs54 per kg in January 2019. The retail price, however, increased from Rs56 to Rs59, a rise of 6%.

With the increasing exports, prices increased regularly for domestic consumers. Even after the ban on sugar exports in February, prices remain on the higher side.

Between December 2019 and March 2020, the ex-mill price for sugar increased by 39% to Rs72. In the same period, the retail price increased by 33% to Rs80.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)’s April 2020 report also mentions that wholesale prices for sugar in Pakistan were over 50% higher in March than the international prices.

The sugar industry has benefitted enormously from the government’s policy. In addition to the export subsidy of Rs3 billion by the Punjab government, the sugar mill owners have received extra profit to the extent of Rs85 billion – Rs5.7 billion per month from January 2019 to the end of March 2020.

The above discussion demonstrates that the government’s sugar policy distorts the local market. This harms poor the most and inflicts huge costs on the domestic economy. The only beneficiary is the influential and powerful sugar industry.

At the time of pandemic and huge risks to economy, the government should refrain from intervening in the sugar market and consider reforms in the industry through parliamentary procedures and democratic practices.

In this hour of economic crisis, the government should focus more on the protection of poor and welfare of society through the provision of public goods like healthcare and strengthen the social safety nets.

The writer is a PhD from the UK and writes for The Guardian as well

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2218472/2-pakistans-sugar-policy-needs-reforms/>

HAILSTORM DAMAGES WHEAT CROP, ORCHARDS IN BAJAUR

The Newspaper's Correspondent Updated May 12, 2020

KHAR: Rain coupled with hailstorm damaged standing wheat crop, vegetables and orchards in Mamond tehsil of Bajaur tribal district, residents and officials said on Monday.

They said that hailstorm accompanied by rain started just after Iftari and lasted for about one hour.

They said that Dabar, Badan, Shah Goo, Shahi Thangi, Mokha, Kalpanim Kaga, Sewai and other hilly areas were the worst affected.

Local residents told this correspondent that hailstones were very large in size, severely damaging the standing crop of wheat, vegetables and orchards in the region.

They said that the growers were expecting good harvest of wheat crop this year, but hailstones largely damaged it.

District agriculture officer Ziaul Islam Dawar told Dawn that the hailstorm caused extensive damage to wheat crop and vegetables in Mamond tehsil.

Published in Dawn, May 12th, 2020

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556473/hailstorm-damages-wheat-crop-orchards-in-bajaur>

33,000 TONS OF WHEAT RECOVERED DURING RAIDS: MINISTER

By RECORDER REPORT on May 12, 2020

The Punjab Food Department has so far recovered 33,130 tons of stored wheat by raiding 436 storage places in different districts of the province.

The recovered wheat has been seized and action is being taken against the accused under the law, said Senior Minister Punjab Abdul Aleem Khan here on Monday.

The minister said that strict action was being taken against wheat stockpiling across the province and crackdown was being carried out indiscriminately against the elements involved in this heinous crime.

In a briefing session of the food department, Aleem Khan said that for the last two weeks, strict checks were being carried out on the land and river routes of Punjab where smuggling of wheat had been curtailed with the help of the intelligence agencies and Rangers.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/12/596146/three-3000-tons-of-wheat-recovered-during-raids-minister/>

KHARIF SEASON PADDY TO BE SOWN OVER 4.618M ACRES IN PUNJAB

RECORDER REPORT May 12, 2020

SIALKOT: More than 4.618 million acres of land would be brought under paddy crop during Kharif season in various rice growing areas of the Punjab.

Sources in Agriculture department told Business Recorder on Monday that the department had chalked out a well-knitted training programme to create awareness among the growers about the use of recommended seed and proper use of fertilizer to attain the fixed target in Punjab.

In this regard, the department deputed special training teams which were visiting various villages for providing proper guidance and assistance about the use of inputs, nursery sowing and transfer of plants into fields to the rice growers in the Punjab.

In Sialkot district, paddy will be cultivated on 317030 acres of land in Sialkot, Daska, Pasrur and Sambrial tehsils during Kharif season. The paddy would be sown on 91083 acres in Sialkot, 78053 acres in Daska, 103098 acres in Pasrur and 44796 acres in Sambrial tehsils of Sialkot district. Local agriculture department had initiated farmers training programme in 1442 villages of Sialkot, Daska, Pasrur and Sambrial tehsils of Sialkot district. Special training teams were busy to empower rice growers for enhancing per acre yield, sowing of paddy nurseries, utilization of irrigation water, pesticides and fertilizer as well as about the different varieties of paddy in Sialkot district, the sources added.

Some progressive farmers were adopting modern technology for raising rice nursery by automatic machine in plastic trays at local agriculture farm and ready for transplanting by 'Rice Trans Planter' in Bajwat area of Sialkot.

<https://epaper.brecorder.com/2020/05/12/10-page/836745-news.html>

TRADING ACTIVITIES RESUME ON COTTON MARKET

By RECORDER REPORT on May 12, 2020

Trading activities resume on the cotton market on Monday after the closure of more than one and a half months due to the coronavirus lockdown.

Market sources said that traders are hopeful that situation will be improved gradually after the softening of the lockdown by the government.

Cotton analyst Naseem Usman told that both federal and provincial governments should take steps to save the cotton crop from the locust attack. The recent report of Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations warned of a potentially serious food security crisis this year in several regional countries, including Pakistan, due to locust attacks.

It is expected that Pakistan's Rabi and Kharif crops will be badly affected by locust attack. According to the estimates Pakistan's economy has to bear the loss of Rs 669 billion due to the locust attack during the current year.

Naseem Usman said that Spot Rate Committee of Karachi Cotton Association has stable the spot rate at Rs 8600 per maund. The rate of cotton in Sindh and Punjab is in between Rs 7000 to Rs 8600 per maund. The rate of polyester fiber was decreased by Rs 3 per kg and was available at Rs 157 per kg.

<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/12/596129/trading-activities-resume-on-cotton-market/>

K-P CHALKS OUT STRATEGY TO BATTLE LOCUSTS

By Our Correspondent Published: May 12, 2020

PESHAWAR: After crops in multiple districts were ravaged by locusts, the provincial government on Monday said that it has prepared an inclusive strategy for tackling the pests.

Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (K-P) Minister for Agriculture and Livestock, Mohibullah Khan on Monday presided over a meeting to review the agriculture department's response to battling swarms of locusts.

Agriculture Secretary Israr Khan, Agriculture Extension Director-General Abid Kamal and other senior officials attended the meeting.

The provincial agriculture minister was briefed on the presence of locusts and measures to control it.

The minister was told that teams have been formed at the district level where locust swarms are present.

At least 25,833 acres of land has been sprayed with insecticides in 15 districts of the province to control the locusts, the minister was told.

To further control the roving swarms of locusts, Mohibullah was told that aerial spray will also be conducted.

The locusts entered K-P through Sherani, Mosakhel and Zhobs districts of Balochistan on January 25 this year and since then have spread to several southern districts of the province.

As a result, the provincial government had been forced to impose an emergency in all locust-hit districts of K-P on January 28. The emergency was later extended to other districts of the province which were affected by locusts.

Published in The Express Tribune, May 12th, 2020.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2219416/1-k-p-chalks-strategy-battle-locusts/>

CS ORDERS GOVT DEPTS TO COLLABORATE TO COMBAT LOCUSTS

By APP Published: May 12, 2020

LAHORE: Punjab Chief Secretary Jawwad Rafique Malik on Monday directed the departments concerned to work collectively on scientific lines to combat locust. "These departments include Provincial Disaster Management Authority (PDMA), Agriculture, Livestock and Forest."

He expressed these views while presiding over a meeting to review steps to control locust in the province. Senior Member Board of Revenue (SMBR) Babar Hayat Tarar, Agriculture secretary, PDMA director general and senior army officers attended the meeting.

The SMBR told the meeting that 150 vehicles and 260 motorcycle were being used for spray in locust-affected areas and so far 114,406 hectares of land had been covered.

As many as 760 solo power were also being utilized for carrying out spray, he added. He further said that a working group headed by SMBR and comprising secretaries of different departments including Finance, Agriculture, Livestock and Forest was supervising the situation.

Similarly, a core committee consisting of Agriculture DG, PDMA DG, representatives of army and Cholistan Development Authority was working against the pest.

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<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2219454/1-cs-orders-govt-depts-collaborate-combat-locusts/>

ECC READY TO APPROVE FARM PACKAGE

By Zafar Bhutta Published: May 12, 2020

ISLAMABAD: The Economic Coordination Committee (ECC), which is scheduled to meet on Wednesday, is set to approve a Rs56-billion bailout package for the agriculture sector amid the growing impact of Covid-19 pandemic.

The government has already announced a stimulus package of over Rs1.2 trillion to cushion the impact of Covid-19. Out of this, Rs100 billion has been earmarked for giving relief to small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and the agriculture sector.

The Ministry of National Food Security and Research has prepared a package of incentives for farmers in various sub-sectors of the agriculture sector to help them to cope with the impact of Covid-19. The ministry has submitted its proposals for ECC's consideration.

The food security ministry has proposed a subsidy of Rs925 per bag of di-ammonium phosphate (DAP) and other phosphoric fertilisers and Rs243 per bag of urea and other nitrogen fertilisers. Total subsidy cost will be Rs37 billion.

Agrarian dilemma: Is the smart subsidy really smart for Pakistani farmers?

The subsidy scheme will be implemented by the provinces and funds will be disbursed through the scratch card scheme, already being implemented by Punjab. The subsidy on fertilisers has been proposed for the Kharif crop (April-October).

At present, the government gives subsidy to fertiliser manufacturers on gas supply that is said to be not fully passed on to consumers. This time, the government has decided to give a direct subsidy to the farmers.

Farmers have been facing high-interest rates of up to 18.4% on bank loans. This has been a major problem that has caused losses to them over the past few years as they cannot add adequate inputs to crops.

Now, the government has decided to reduce the mark-up on loans. However, the proposed rate of interest is still high that the farmers may not be able to afford.

At present, the mark-up on agricultural loans provided by Zarai Taraqati Bank Limited is 18.4%. A reduction to 10% has been proposed for 2020 for ECC's approval. The mark-up subsidy will require Rs8.8 billion.

A subsidy of Rs150 per kg of cottonseed has been recommended for the Kharif 2020 crop season in Punjab and Sindh. This subsidy will require an amount of Rs2.3 billion.

Another subsidy of Rs300 per bag of pesticides, meant for combating white fly, has been proposed. The subsidy will cover five million acres in Punjab and Sindh, which is around 80% of the cotton area. The total cost of the subsidy will be Rs6 billion.

The food security ministry has proposed 5% sales tax subsidy on locally manufactured tractors for one year. The total cost of the subsidy will be Rs2.5 billion. Sources said the finance ministry had endorsed the subsidy for the agriculture sector.

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<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2219479/2-ecc-ready-approve-farm-package/>

CHICKEN PRICES SHOOT UP

Aamir Shafaat Khan May 13, 2020

KARACHI: Retailers have raised the prices of chicken beyond the reach of many people as the live bird is selling at Rs230-240 per kg and meat at Rs350-400 per kg, showing an increase of Rs70-80 a kilo over the past few days.

Surprisingly, the official rate of live bird and its meat is Rs138 and Rs214 per kg but shopkeepers have neither displayed the price list, nor are they selling the bird at the control rate.

Poultry retailers are demanding Rs600 for boneless chicken as compared to Rs500 per kg.

Poultry traders say that prices usually crash on low demand and soar on high demand, but here they link the price hike to a short supply of birds from farms.

General secretary of the Sindh Poultry Wholesalers and Retailers Association Kamal Akhtar Siddiqui said in last week of March, poultry industry had warned consumers regarding price hike in coming months because farmers were not putting day-old chicks at their farms owing to massive decline in sale due to closure of wedding halls, restaurants, hotels, barbecues, etc, during the lockdown which was imposed in third week of March to control spread of coronavirus.

He said wholesale price of live bird had risen to Rs210 from Rs140 and meat to Rs367 from Rs245 per kg.

“Despite price hike, poultry is still cheaper when compared with veal meat prices of Rs600-700 per kg (with and without bones) and mutton at Rs1,200 per kg,” he said adding that even good quality fish was selling at Rs700 per kg.

The government had allowed online sale of food during limited hours slightly offsetting the negative impact of low chicken sale to some extent.

A number of people prefer to make chicken-related dishes at home rather than taking risk of ordering online food in view of lingering coronavirus threat.

Consumers are now paying the price of huge losses of poultry sector’s declining sales in March and April and the government’s price control machinery does not exist to rescue consumers, some observers said.

The government has remained focused towards dealing with the opening of different trades and finalising standard operating procedures (SOPs) for various industries since the start of lockdown.

However, with or without price list, stakeholders had continued to challenge the government’s writ in selling products on their own terms.

There is literally no fear among shopkeepers, wholesalers and product manufacturers to face any strict action like heavy fines or imprisonment against price hike, the observers added.

The Pakistan Poultry Association (PPA) in last week of March said that hatcheries had stopped setting eggs for chick production amid depressed sales.

Egg layers had also been culled, which was already showing signs of short supply of eggs.

Broiler breeders, which were consuming feed, had been sold at throwaway prices for meat.

From the above situation, birds supply in the markets would remain in short supply in coming months.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556656/chicken-prices-shoot-up>

RAHU REITERATES NEED FOR CENTRE'S HELP TO KEEP LOCUSTS AT BAY

The Newspaper's Staff Correspondent May 13, 2020

HYDERABAD: Sindh Minister for Agriculture Ismail Rahu has apprehended that locusts currently present in many districts of the province could cause heavy damage to the agriculture sector if not eliminated before rainfall.

“It’s the most dangerous enemy we are faced with after Covide-19,” he remarked while chairing a meeting of agriculture extension officials and later addressing a press conference at Shahbaz Hall here on Tuesday.

Mr Rahu was of the view that locusts would inflict a heavy loss to agricultural produce in Sindh and Punjab in the next few months as monsoon was approaching. The loss would ultimately cause food insecurity on a large scale, he added.

“It’s a major issue as the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and other international forums have already warned that locusts could attack Pakistan 10 times this year,” the minister said.

He told the meeting that the federal government should help Sindh carry out aerial spray to eliminate locusts’ swarms that had already devoured standing crops and green patches in many districts and were a potential threat to remaining agricultural fields in Sindh.

He noted that the swarms were constantly attacking certain districts over the past two months.

He recalled that the federal government had declared a ‘national emergency’ in January this year and prepared a national action plan to deal with the menace in three phases. “The first phase is near completion but no significant success has been achieved so far,” he pointed out, and regretted that no effective action was being taken while only meetings after meetings on the issue were being held.

The minister quoted surveys, conducted by some international organisations, suggesting that 300,000 square kilometre area of Pakistan could come under locust attack. The areas identified in the surveys were 50pc of Balochistan, 35pc of Sindh and 15pc of Punjab. “This means that 100,000sq-km area is vulnerable and 50,000sq-km area has already come under attack or threatened by the swarms existing in Sindh,” he said.

He, however, noted that this time, locusts swarms in Sindh appeared to be in transition and that was why they did not cause a huge loss to crops but during and after rainfall, they would definitely pose a serious threat to farmlands in the province. “The swarms are flying towards India but very likely to return in the rainy season,” he said, adding that myriads of swarms did exist in Iran as well and could enter Pakistan via Balochistan.

“We apprehend a three- or four-pronged invasion by locusts from the desert areas of Sindh targeting seven districts and this would be an alarming situation,” he said.

Mr Rahu called for effective and coordinated joint efforts by his department, federal plant protection department, National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) and other relevant departments to face the challenge. He noted that the army also stood by the Sindh government in this exercise.

Explaining Sindh’s position in this context, the minister said aerial spray was the most effective method but there was only one aircraft without a pilot made available to the provincial government against the actual requirement of six each with a pilot. He said the available aircraft was meant for aerial spray in Sukkur district while five other ones were required

for such operations in three other districts — Hyderabad, Mirpur-khas and Shaheed Benazirabad. Also, against the requirement of 25 sprayer-mounted vehicles, only five were made available to Sindh, he added.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556649/rahu-reiterates-need-for-centres-help-to-keep-locusts-at-bay>

OTTON PRODUCTION SLIDE

By NUZHAT NAZAR on May 13, 2020

The Federal Cabinet on Tuesday decided that the support price of cotton should be fixed after thorough consultations with all the stakeholders in order to encourage farmers to sow more and more cotton as its cultivation has been woefully declining.

Prime minister Imran Khan, who chaired the cabinet's meeting, was in favour of giving subsidies on cotton seed and fertilizer, so that poor growers could benefit.

The cabinet also decided to amend laws on appointment of heads of various government institutions and autonomous bodies in the country. It also reviewed the audit reports relating to alleged embezzlement in the affairs of Karachi Port Trust (KPT).

After the federal cabinet meeting, Information Minister Senator Shibli Faraz, while giving a news briefing, said that a seven-point agenda was discussed in the cabinet meeting.

The information minister said a committee has been constituted to frame a law with regard to appointment of heads for government entities.

He said the committee will work under the supervision of Advisor for Institutional Reforms Dr Ishrat Hussain, which will present its recommendations within a week.

He said Minister for Narcotics Control Azam Khan Swati presented 39 proposals to the prime minister on electoral reforms, which the prime minister appreciated.

The information minister said the decisions of the Cabinet Committee on Energy were ratified in the meeting, while the prime minister directed to expedite the reforms in the energy sector.

Shibli Faraz also said that the PTI is the only party, which has introduced reforms in the electoral process, while reforms in the energy sector are the government's priority.

The information minister said the cabinet approved the names of the National Commission for the Status of Women but the members would be decided by the prime minister.

He said that the cabinet had approved the application of Pakistan Essential Services Act, 1952, on all employees of the National Institutional Facilitation Technology and the approval had been given for six months.

Shibli Faraz also said that the cabinet approved the appointment of member National Accounts and member Census in the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, and also approved the audit to rectify the irregularities in the affairs of the Karachi Port Trust (KPT).

The cabinet approved the names of the members of the National Commission for Status of Women and National Bureau of Statistics.

It also approved decisions taken by the Cabinet's Committee on Energy and Economic Coordination Committee.

The information minister said the cabinet reviewed matters pertaining to audit survey regarding embezzlement in Karachi Port Trust.

Senator Shibli Faraz said Prime Minister Imran Khan also sought a report regarding illegal and unlawful appointments in 12 different ministries within one week.

Talking about the coronavirus challenge, the minister said no country in the world can afford continuous lockdown, and a decision regarding ease in countrywide lockdown was taken in view of difficulties being faced by poor labour class.

He said the government has limited resources and infrastructure, and continuous lockdown was not possible under the prevailing conditions.

The minister urged the citizens and members of the civil society to adopt all necessary precautionary measures, follow guidelines and the SOPs, and support government in its endeavors to contain the pandemic.

APP adds: The PM said all the lacunas in the election laws would be addressed so that the people's trust in the election process was restored and nobody could raise a finger on the transparency of election. A transparent and credible electoral process was the foundation of democracy and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) was the only party which had taken serious efforts and practical steps for electoral reforms.

Expressing the government's commitment, the prime minister directed to intensify efforts so that electoral reforms process should be completed as soon as possible.

Shibli Faraz said the cabinet discussed the issue of unlawful appointments made in various ministries during the previous governments. It transpired that appointments without any cabinet approval were made in 12 ministries. Expressing his serious concern, the prime minister directed all the ministries to share details in next cabinet meeting so that action could be taken on the issue.

Senator Shibli Faraz said the cabinet also approved the names of the members of National Commission on the Status of Women, including Shaista Bukhari from Punjab, Habiba Hassan from Sindh, Rubina Naz Advocate from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Fatima Iqbal from Balochistan, Madhiha Sultana from AJK, Sosan Aziz from Gilgit Baltistan and Asia Azeem from the Federal Capital.

The minister said the PM directed steps for provision of energy to the consumers at affordable rates and reduction of the circular debt. He also directed the minister for energy to complete the process of reformation in various departments of the ministry with a time line.

He said Minister for Planning and Development Asad Umar gave a briefing on the steps being taken to control the coronavirus in the country and presented the report on the situation after relaxation in the lockdown.

Imran Khan remarked that activities in the construction and other sectors had even been allowed by the developed countries keeping in view the ground realities. Keeping the economy afloat and balancing security measures was imperative, he added.

Shibli Faraz it was observed that generally the people did not adopt precautionary measures and the cabinet appealed to them to strictly follow the standard operating procedures (SOPs) as the country could not afford a surge in the coronavirus cases.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/13/596489/country-on-the-brink-of-a-wheat-crisis-pbif-chief/>

PPA OPPOSES PUNJAB GOVT'S BID TO CONTROL POULTRY PRICES

By RECORDER REPORT on May 13, 2020

Pakistan Poultry Association (Northern Region) has urged the Punjab government to allow the free-market mechanism to regulate demand and supply instead of intervening in market prices.

PPA (Northern Region) Vice Chairman Chaudhry Muhammad Fargham while talking to media persons here on Tuesday said the industry was very hurt and depressed by the Punjab government's action of controlling the prices of live chicken and meat. He claimed that the commissioner animal husbandry in the ministry of national food security had submitted cost of production to the Chief Justice of Peshawar High Court as far back as in March 2012 at Rs 31.27 for day old chicks and Rs 132.50/kg for broilers. The current costs are around Rs 45 for day old chick and Rs 160 for broilers. As per calculation of Director PRI Rawalpindi, the cost of production is Rs.145 per kg live.

The association kept the government fully abreast of the situation through different means and said it would lead to an acute shortage of poultry products as the losses would result in a reduction in production and that prices will shoot up. "We had advised the government that in the event of an increase in price, supply would partially but gradually increase to some extent. We had strongly advised the government not to intervene in free-market mechanism but the governments paid no heed," he added.

He said now the market is allowing surviving farmers to recover their losses, the administration is arresting the sellers of chicken meat and forcing them to sell meat at Rs 260/Kg. Such actions would lead to long term closure of poultry farms, which would lead to not only a tremendous increase in chicken meat prices but also mutton, beef and pulses as well, he warned.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/13/596558/govt-committed-to-fulfill-commitments-under-27th-intl-conventions-tweets-pm/>

LOCUST ATTACKS COULD INCREASE TEN TIMES THIS YEAR, FEARS MINISTER

By RECORDER REPORT on May 13, 2020

Sindh Minister for Agriculture Mohammed Ismail Rahu has said that according to the agriculture experts of the world the swarms of locust attacks could be increased ten times more than those of the last year. He informed that the season of two

main crops of cotton and rice was about to start as well as monsoon season was going to start soon which was also the breeding season for locusts as well therefore three months of June, July and August were important in this regard.

This he said while presiding over a meeting about preventive measures for Locust attacks at Agriculture Extension Office, Shahbaz Building, Hyderabad on Tuesday.

The minister further said that swarms of locusts were attacking in Sindh like last year and this danger could not be avoided. He directed the officers concerned for stopping the breeding of locusts in deserted areas of Sindh which according to him could be effective. He said that all resources would be utilized for the elimination of locusts. He asked the officers concerned to take this task as challenge and utilize their expertise and experience to eliminate locusts and save standing crops. He underlined the need for focusing Mirpurkhas, Sukkur and Shaheed Benazirabad divisions situated near to Thar Desert which was the breeding area of locusts.

He said that Sindh Agriculture Department had remained busy for elimination of locusts for one year. Rahu also directed the officers concerned to resolve the problems of growers.

Director General Agriculture Hidayatullah Chajro briefed the meeting about preventive measures for locusts.

The participants of the meeting also gave suggestions for the prevention of locusts. Director Agriculture Shaukat Hussain Mastoi informed the meeting about the present situation of Subzi Mandi and other related issues.

Later Talking to media men, the minister said that the locusts had been present in Sindh for one year and couple of days earlier locusts attacked on crops in different parts of Hyderabad Division. He said that the Sindh government was continuously trying hard to prevent locusts. He informed that the different agriculture institutes of the world issued warning of locusts attacks in our region. He said that after Coronavirus the locusts were the biggest problem for Pakistan, the situation would be worsened in coming days, as locusts from Iran and India could attack in our country, he added. He informed that 57 teams were working for preventing locust attacks and now 41 more teams had been added for this purpose. He said that we were trying to make teams ready at taluka level to spray at any time and added that a helpline number had also been given to growers to inform about locusts' attack. Replying a question, he said that there was no conflict of Sindh with the federal government, we just demanded to federal Plant Protection Department for aerial spray.

He said that losses to crops were being estimated and soon details would be issued.

To a question, he said that due to Covid-19 the problems were being faced on wheat procurement but the Sindh government would achieve its target of wheat procurement. Replying another question, he said that due to Coronavirus, the export of mangoes would be affected.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/13/596455/locust-attacks-could-increase-ten-times-this-year-fears-minister/>

72 PERCENT OF WHEAT PROCUREMENT TARGET COMPLETED, CLAIMS MINISTER

By RECORDER REPORT on May 13, 2020

Punjab has achieved 72 percent of the 4.5 million tons of wheat procurement target set for the current year while 92 percent of 'baardana' (gunny bags) have been distributed among the farmers.

Food Minister Abdul Aleem Khan said this while replying to the questions of food department during the current session of Punjab Assembly. He said a coordinated policy has been implemented for the procurement of wheat in Punjab which has tried to bring direct benefits to common farmers. He also said that the government has ensured uninterrupted supply of "baardana" to the farmers all over the province. He said he himself is keeping an eye on wheat procurement drive and making on the spot checking of all the procedure and claimed no complaint has been received in this regard.

The Minister said that Punjab has set a target of purchasing 4.5 million metric tonnes of wheat which will be completed ahead of time. He said the Punjab government would also meet the wheat requirement of KPK by purchasing additional wheat while another 5 lakh metric tonnes is also under consideration for an extraordinary situation.

Aleem Khan assured that people of Punjab will not be facing the shortage of food grains. He claimed that the food department is fulfilling its responsibilities and all necessary steps are being taken to meet the requirements. He also answered various supplementary questions of the food department and informed the session about the steps taken by it for the betterment of this sector.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/13/596449/seven-2-percent-of-wheat-procurement-target-completed-claims-minister/>

90% BAGS FOR COLLECTING WHEAT DISTRIBUTED

By Our Correspondent Published: May 13, 2020

LAHORE: Provincial Senior Minister Abdul Aleem Khan has said that a coordinated policy has been implemented for the procurement of wheat in Punjab while trying to bring direct benefits to the farmers.

Replying to lawmakers' questions about the Food Department in the Punjab Assembly, he added that 72 per cent target of the procurement of wheat has been achieved in Punjab, while the distribution of 92 per cent bags to farmers has been completed for the purpose so far.

The minister said the Punjab government has ensured uninterrupted supply of sacks to the farmers all over the province this year. He told the house that he had inspected the wheat procurement drive and found no complaint on the ground.

He said Punjab has set a target of purchasing 4.5 million tonnes of wheat, which will hopefully be completed ahead of time. He said the Punjab government would also meet the wheat requirement of K-P besides. He said the additional purchase of 500,000 tonnes is also under consideration to meet an extraordinary situation.

The minister said illegal transportation of wheat in Punjab has been strictly curtailed and largescale operations have been carried out against hoarders without any discrimination.

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<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2220247/1-90-bags-collecting-wheat-distributed/>

FLOUR CRISIS FEARED AS PRICE GOES UP

Ali Hazrat Bacha May 14, 2020

PESHAWAR: The price of a 20kg wheat flour bag went up by Rs30 here on Wednesday as the local millers stopped supplies to hundreds of points selling flour in different parts of the provincial capital at subsidised rate.

Flour dealers of the main Rampura Market told Dawn that 20kg bag of mixed quality flour was sold for Rs920-Rs930 in the wholesale level against the previous rate of Rs870-Rs880 and the 20kg fine atta bag at Rs1,000.

The Bara Road wholesalers and retailers were found to have fixed the price at will.

According to the dealers, sales points were set up in different localities to provide flour to people at the controlled price of Rs808 per bag but they're closed at the moment.

They said wheat supply from Punjab had been suspended to the mills of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa leading to the closure of sales points.

Millers insist situation caused by halt to wheat supply from Punjab

The dealers said the flour price had increased in Punjab, where millers continuously demanded increase in wheat quota at the subsidised rate but the government didn't do so.

They added that the dealers of KP, too, had to purchase wheat at high price.

Meanwhile, the Pakistan Flour Mills Association, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, has warned a halt to the grinding of wheat over the suspension of supplies at subsidised rate from the provincial government.

It also feared a severe flour crisis in the province after Eidul Fitr.

"All of our 180 flour mills are to stop the grinding within a couple of days due to ban on wheat supply from Punjab KP flour mills," association president Haji Mohammad Iqbal told Dawn.

He demanded the lifting of the ban on wheat supply from Punjab to KP to control flour price hike.

Meanwhile, the millers led by Mohammad Naeem Butt and office-bearers of the Sarhad Chamber of Commerce and Industry also held a meeting at the chamber's offices with SCCI president Engineer Maqsood Anwar Pervaiz in the chair.

They demanded of Chief Minister Mahmood Khan to intervene and ensure the restoration of wheat supply from Punjab to KP.

The millers said the government of Punjab had imposed an 'unconstitutional' and 'unlawful' ban on wheat transportation to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and that ban was a clear violation of Article 151 of the Constitution.

"Our province is deficient in wheat, so it mostly depends on Punjab to fulfil its needs," a miller said.

He said wheat supply to local mills from the government's godowns had come to a halt and that all mills would be closed under the prevailing circumstances as there was no other option to acquire wheat.

The millers said due to the unavailability of wheat on the market, they were unable to continue supplying flour to the markets at the subsidised price, which had led to the fear of flour shortage across the province.

"We had earlier warned the government to take up the wheat ban issue with Sindh, Punjab and federal governments but they paid no attention," Mr Naeem Butt said.

He added that the entire responsibility rested with the provincial government.

The miller alleged that the current performance of the provincial government, especially food department, in the prevailing circumstances was very disappointing.

Mr Maqsood Pervaiz asked the government to lift the 'inter-provincial' ban on wheat supply from Punjab to KP to ensure the timely availability of wheat to local mills and fulfil the requirement of food commodity and avert any flour crisis in the province.

He said the economic and business activities had slowed down due to the prolonged coronavirus-induced lockdown, while the imposition of ban on the transportation of wheat and unavailability of wheat for local mills would lead to the closure of flour industry in the province.

The SCCI chief said the unavailability of wheat for KP flour mills was completely unjust and unbearable and that the ban on wheat transportation should be lifted immediately.

He urged Prime Minister Imran Khan, federal food minister and secretary and other authorities to take an immediate notice of the 'unconstitutional' and 'unlawful' inter-provincial restrictions on wheat supply and ensure the smooth availability of wheat of KP flour mills.

When contacted, food secretary Nisar Ahmad said the province had a stock of over 35,000 metric tons of wheat in its godowns but that was meant for emergency situation only.

"We regularly provide wheat quota to local mills but now Punjab has stopped supplies due to own requirements, so millers have to arrange wheat privately by themselves," he said.

The official said the province's mills had to depend 80 per cent on wheat from Punjab.

"KP markets have flour in sufficient quantity but wheat supply has been stopped by Punjab due to local procurement process," he said.

The secretary said wheat harvesting had begun in KP, so millers should acquire it to operate mills until the regular supply was made from official godowns.

He said the relevant authorities were well aware of the situation.

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ECC OKAYS RS50BN FOR AGRICULTURE SECTOR

Khaleeq Kiani Updated May 14, 2020

ISLAMABAD: The government on Wednesday approved a Rs50 billion package for the agriculture sector and about Rs17bn additional funds to defence forces to foot extra fuel bills.

The decisions were taken at a meeting of the Economic Coordination Committee (ECC) of the Cabinet, presided over by Finance Adviser Dr Abdul Hafeez Shaikh, that also approved in principle a cell phone assembling policy.

The ECC was given a demand of Rs56.6bn agriculture package to provide the farmers subsidy on fertilisers, reduction in bank mark-up on agriculture loans, subsidy on cotton seed and white fly pesticides and sales tax subsidy on locally manufactured tractors as part Rs100bn earmarked for farmers and small and medium enterprises (SME) out of the Rs1,200bn coronavirus relief package.

However, Shaikh asked the food security ministry to rationalise it to Rs50bn as per its share in the overall Rs100 package announced for the SMEs and the agriculture sector.

He said the ECC had already approved a Rs50bn package for the former to provide indirect cash flow support to nearly 3.5 million people through pre-paid electricity.

Rs17bn set aside for defence forces' fuel bill

Under the agriculture package, about Rs37bn subsidy would be offered to farmers on the purchase of fertilisers. The amount would include a subsidy of Rs925 per bag on DAP and other phosphatic fertilisers and Rs243 per bag on urea and other nitrogen fertilisers.

The ECC was told that the estimated urea offtake would be around 3.04m tonnes while DAP was estimated at 0.95m tonnes for the Kharif season. The subsidy scheme will be implemented by the provinces and the amount will be disbursed through a scratch card scheme already in place in Punjab.

It was also informed that the fertiliser share in the cost of production for major crops was around 10-15 per cent and the provision of subsidy would increase their affordability to adopt the recommended level of fertiliser nutrient use and best agricultural management practices.

Similarly, under the agriculture package, a reduction in mark-up of agri loans at the total cost of Rs8.8bn, subsidy on cotton seed worth Rs2.3bn and white fly pesticides at Rs6bn were also approved.

Furthermore, the ECC called for inclusion of other banks along with Zarai Taraqiati in the scheme to enhance outreach of farmers with focus on subsistence farmers with a land holding of 12.5 acres. It was suggested that since markup had been reduced by the State Bank of Pakistan, the interest rates used in the proposal could also be rationalised accordingly.

The ECC called for the implementation mechanism, especially through the scratch card system, to be monitored carefully to ensure that the actual beneficiaries of the package were genuine farmers.

It was also pointed out that since with the provision of subsidy on fertilisers, their demand might increase, the same had to be communicated to the Ministry of Industries and Production (MoIP) in time to make arrangements accordingly.

The meeting approved a proposal by the Poverty Alleviation & Social Safety Division for disbursement of the Special Relief Package for the population living along the Line of Control in a single installment of Rs12,000 for six months from January-June while from July onwards, those families will be given monthly installments of Rs2,000 each until end of December.

The ECC took up different proposals for technical supplementary grants by various divisions and approved one by the Defence Division for a supplementary grant of Rs16.6bn to meet the expenses on POL, utilities and medical stores of the Defence Services.

In addition, it okayed Rs288m for payment of salaries to the employees of Pakistan Machine Tool Factory for the period from October 2019 to June 2020 and Rs40 million to the law ministry for employee-related costs and operating expenditures of the Federal Judicial Academy.

The ECC also discussed the Mobile Device Manufacturing Policy as proposed by the MoIP with the objectives of technology acquisition and localisation of mobile devices through domestic investment, joint ventures, FDIs, creation of 200,000 direct and indirect jobs, price reduction for consumers, increase in digitisation through supporting 4G/5G

technologies, development of efficient manufacturing ecosystem, exports of competitively manufactured handsets and achievement of security objectives.

It deliberated upon various components of the policy and approved in-principle with instructions to the MoIP to further fine-tune its various features and incentives for promoting localisation and research and development leading to export of mobile phones.

Lastly, the ECC gave green signal to the release of 35,000 tonnes of wheat from the Pakistan Agriculture Storage and Services Corporation to the Azad Jammu and Kashmir government at Rs1.52bn, including the cost of wheat and incidental charges, to be paid 50pc by the federal administration from the stimulus package announced to fight against Covid-19.

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DIESEL SHORTAGE, POL PRICES CUT MAY HAMPER WHEAT HARVESTING

Amjad Mahmood May 11, 2020

LAHORE: There seems to be no let-up in the miseries of the farmers as the authorities remain apathetic to the diesel shortage being faced by them in the middle of the wheat harvesting season.

Reports of unavailability of diesel in the market had started doing rounds a couple of days after downward revision of the rates of petroleum products on April 30 in line with the sharp decline in their prices in the world market.

Almost all oil marketing companies stopped placing orders with the international suppliers as soon as the Oil and Gas Regulatory Authority (Ogra) hinted at proposing a cut in oil prices.

Already suffering because of shortage of labour due to Covid-19 lockdown, wheat growers are facing another unexpected crisis amid the harvesting season in the form of unavailability of diesel to run their tractors and threshing machines. This may lead to delay in harvesting.

Farmers riding their tractor-trolleys and pick-ups carrying barrels and jerry cans can be seen queuing up at the filling stations to get diesel, particularly in Bhakkar, Layyah and Mianwali districts of Punjab. In most cases, they return empty-handed or get a few litres of diesel.

“At a time when I should have been in my lands to oversee wheat harvesting, I’m forced to line up at petrol pumps to get diesel for my tractor-run thresher,” laments Rana Haider, a farmer from Thal area in Bhakkar.

Talking to Dawn by phone, he says that he has lost his three precious days in search of diesel but failed to find the product and he is paying rent for the threshing machine without using it.

Saeed Baloch, a petrol pump owner in Mianwali, claims the oil marketing companies have introduced quota regimes since April 30 for the first time on the basis of average calculated on the yearly basis and thus are providing them one-fourth of the supplies against the demand.

The companies are also delaying the supplies contrary to their normal routines, he alleges, explaining that he would get oil supply the next day of placing the order. But, since the recent cut in prices, this gap between placement of order and supplies has widened to the minimum four days, creating a severe shortage particularly of diesel, he adds.

He wonders why the government didn't manage the situation while the state-run Pakistan State Oil had flagged the issued in the first week of May.

An official of the PSO Lahore region alleges that the private oil marketing companies (OMCs) are not supplying petroleum products to their respective dealers and thus the whole pressure has been diverted to the PSO outlets. He says that his entity is supplying one million litres of diesel daily only in Lahore region to meet the wheat harvesting-related demand.

A petroleum dealer, Rehmat Khan Wardag, says OMCs have not placed orders for the import of petroleum products since the recent cut in oil prices. He says the OMCs suffered billions of rupees losses in the process and fears that the volatile situation in the world markets will keep them away from the business in coming weeks, which may lead to severe shortage of oil, particularly diesel, in the local market.

He has urged the government to import oil on its own without delay to fend off the hovering shortage that may plunge the sectors dependent on diesel, particularly the agriculture sector, into a severe crisis.

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FOOD OFFICIAL MANHANDLED BY TOWN COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN FOR INTERCEPTING WHEAT STOCK

Dawn Report May 11, 2020

UMERKOT: Harassment and manhandling of a food department official by Samaro town committee chairman late on Saturday evening sent a wave of anger among food officials across the town. An emergency meeting of senior food officials was held on Sunday to condemn the incident.

It was gathered that food inspector Iftikhar Arain, along with a police team, intercepted a consignment of 1,200 wheat bags of 40-kg each while it was being transported by two trucks to some other district. The action was taken as part of the ongoing campaign against hoarding/illegal movement of wheat stocks which was causing an artificial shortage of the commodity and wheat flour in the province.

According to Mr Arain, when he impounded one truck-load of wheat and chased the other truck, Samaro town committee chairman, Rafique Ahmed Qaimkhani, who belonged to the ruling Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), along with some other persons intervened and harassed him to deter him from discharging his official duty. "Qaimkhani abused and held me hostage for some time and then slapped me when I did not agree to come to his terms," alleged Mr Arain.

He said he intended to recover more than 14,000 other wheat bags hoarded in his area of operation to prevent the stocks from being shifted to some other district/province in violation of the relevant ban imposed by the provincial government.

Escorted by a police force, the officials recovered more than 1,00,000 wheat bags and sealed off the mills.

Reacting angrily to the incident, senior food officials held a meeting under the chairmanship of Mohammed Hussain Mahar to discuss the issue. Ghulam Nabi Soomro, Iftikhar Arain and other senior officials including heads of all procurement centres in the district attended the meeting.

The meeting condemned the town committee chairman's act of hooliganism as unacceptable. It said Qaimkhani's attempt of obstructing the food official from performing his duty was unlawful. Appropriate action must be taken against him and those who accompanied him in this unlawful act, it added.

The meeting participants said no one was above the law and, as such, could not be allowed to stop any official from performing duty in line with the orders issued by government.

They resolved to stop performing their official duties pertaining to wheat procurement if action was not taken against the offenders.

SUKKUR: Raids were conducted in three flour mills in the Salehpat town as the drive against hoarders of wheat continued in Sukkur district, food officials said on Saturday.

In Jacobabad, district food controller Asghar Soomro along with Assistant Commissioner of Garhi Khero Sanaullah Bhatti carried out a raid on a rice mill in Dao Jahanpur on the orders of Deputy Commissioner Ghazanfar Ali Qadri.

NAUSHAHRO FEROUZE: District food controller Qareebullah Soomro said on Saturday that around 145,500 wheat bags were recovered in raids on several godowns in grain markets of Bhiriya Road, Kandiaro, Mehrabpur and Khan Wahan towns.

The raiding team found more than 20,000 wheat bags clandestinely stocked there. The stocks were seized and the rice mill was sealed, the officials said.

He told local reporters around 40,000 wheat bags were recovered in Khan Wahan, 35,000 in Mehrabpur, 11,500 in Kandiaro and 60,000 in Bhiriya Road.

All the godowns were sealed, he added.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556097/food-official-manhandled-by-town-committee-chairman-for-intercepting-wheat-stock>

SUKKUR NAB READIES FOUR REFERENCES ON WHEAT SCAM

The Newspaper's Correspondent May 11, 2020

SUKKUR: The Sukkur region of the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) has prepared four references concerning misappropriation of billions of rupees worth of wheat in food department and is ready to file them in accountability court, according to sources.

Sources in the NAB said the references would be filed after seeking formal approval of the bureau's chairman. In this connection, a meeting of NAB's regional board presided over by its Sukkur director general reviewed the scam in Sukkur, Larkana and Shaheed Benazirabad divisions and accorded approval to the references prepared against the corrupt officials of food department.

The sources said the NAB chairman himself had issued directives to file the references over growing complaints about large-scale corruption in food department in different districts of the province.

The sources said that a reference accused deputy director food Anees-ur-Rehman Mahar, district food controller Mohammad Iqbal Memon and others of Rs128 million corruption and another reference blamed Khairpur district food controller Mohammad Ali Ujjan and others of more than Rs58m graft in the stored grain.

The third reference accused Larkana district food controller Zahid Ali Unnar and others of Rs870m corruption and the fourth blamed Kandhkot-Kashmore's deputy director of food Fazal Mohammad Bhangwar and others of more than Rs74m graft.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556096/sukkur-nab-readies-four-references-on-wheat-scam>

IT'S A SEASON OF MANGOES AND COVID-19

Mohammad Hussain Khan May 11, 2020

THE season of the king of fruits — mangoes — has started. But this year, it starts amidst serious concerns of coronavirus spreading in Sindh's rural areas since thousands of labourers arrive from South Punjab, mainly Muzaffargarh. Under the current circumstances, allowing them to enter Sindh is risky since this may allow the contagion to spread in rural areas which, by and large, have remained safe compared with urban areas.

To harvest mangoes, big orchard owners let out their farms to contractors. Punjab's labourers – hired by the orchard contractors – have begun to arrive in Sindh's mango farms, which are larger, through different means of transport, while consignments from these farms have started reaching Punjab.

Till May 7, the Sindh government was debating standard operating procedures (SOPs) to let these workers enter the province. Draft SOPs have been presented to the Sindh government by Sharjeel Inam Memon, an orchard owner who is a Sindh Assembly member from Hyderabad's rural area. He had raised this issue of Punjab's labourers with the government as they turned up in thousands.

"I have discussed SOPs with the Sindh chief minister and he has not yet finalised them. We are trying to see the situation is handled adroitly," says Mr Memon, an influential member of Sindh's ruling party.

Among other measures, the 11-point draft recommends that growers/contractors provide a list of workers from other provinces. It also states enrollment forms will have to be filled and submitted before revenue officials within five working days of labourers commencing work. Items such as gloves, masks and hand sanitisers have to be provided to those working along the entire mango value chain.

Every grower has to try to engage the maximum number of local labourers and minimise hiring from elsewhere for plucking and packing purposes. If a worker develops Covid-19 symptoms, he has to be sent for a checkup. A proforma has to be filled by each worker for tracking and tracing purposes.

'There is no rocket science involved which would prevent local labour from learning to pluck or pack mangoes. Previously, nobody thought of departing from the conventional practice of labour coming in from Punjab to Sindh because there was no reason for it'

The Sindh government is continuously resisting pressure from the PTI-led federal government, as well as the business community, to ease the lockdown. The chief minister had even differed, rightly so, with the 20-point SOPs mutually agreed between the ulema and President Arif Alvi on Taraweeh prayers in Ramazan to stem the spread of the contagion. He feared the SOPs will not be implementable therefore sought to restrict prayer congregations.

Currently, Sindh health officials dealing with the Covid-19 situation and pandemic trajectory believe May is going to be tough from the point of view of a spike in the number of cases. “We are bracing for an exponential rise in cases if the lockdown is eased,” observes a Sindh health official associated with monitoring the Covid-19 situation. “The impact of the decision taken for opening up of businesses will be seen after a fortnight,” he asserted.

Labourers have already started to arrive unchecked in Sindh from Punjab where an upward trend in the number of cases can be seen, and more are on their way. It is a foregone conclusion that the SOPs specific to mango workers will not be doable, any more than those that were drafted for prayer congregations.

“I think this is an opportunity that can bring local labourers forward and help overcome unemployment currently seen in the pandemic’s backdrop,” says Sindh agriculture minister Ismail Rahu, who is the son of hari leader Fazil Rahu. The real issue, he opines, pertains to big farms that are let out to contractors who hire workers from Punjab. “One expert worker brought from Punjab for each farm should be enough, the rest should be purely local labourers to handle the mango crop this season. This is how they will get trained as well,” he remarks.

The issue of workers from Punjab coming to Sindh has surfaced for the first time because of the pandemic, otherwise, it was conventional practice for orchard owners and contractors. Locally known as bharawa and thukawa, labour from Punjab has picked, sorted and packed mangoes with dexterity for years.

The contractors’ argument is since available local labour is not trained, engaging them would cause mango wastage and result in monetary losses. Therefore, this issue is more of contractors than of orchard owners.

Labour from Punjab arrives in groups of 40-50 people. Depending on the size of an orchard, multiple teams work together, switching from one farm to another if need be. They stay at farms and leave once the season is finished, awaiting the arrival of kinnow season in Punjab.

“There is no rocket science involved which would prevent local labour from learning to pluck or pack mangoes. Nobody thought of departing from conventional practice before because there was no reason for it,” remarks Sindh Abadgar Board vice president Mahmood Nawaz Shah, who is also an owner of mango orchards and an exporter. To quote a medium-sized mango grower Nadeem Shah, Punjab’s labour is cheap as well as trained.

The Sindh government remained worried till all the men from Tableeghi Jamaat – who became virus carriers in the province in March – recovered and were repatriated home. The government’s efforts to ensure safe transportation was praised. Given its lockdown policy, it is unlikely that the Murad Shah-led government will have two different standards relating to the same emergency.

While things are challenging this year, it is an opportunity to engage local labour so that they get trained and there is less reliance on workers from another province next season. It would not be difficult for the locals to learn the art of sorting and plucking since they work in the fields all year round. Is saving mangoes more important than saving lives?

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556252/its-a-season-of-mangoes-and-covid-19>

AGRICULTURAL HARDSHIP UNDER LOCKDOWN

Amjad Mahmood Updated May 11, 2020

THE agriculture sector is facing one of its biggest crises. On one hand, erratic weather and the resultant untimely heavy rains and hailstorms, coupled with the locust attack, are making it hard for farmers to sleep at night. On the other hand, the lockdown since mid-March has created many challenges and negatively impacted the rural population in general and small farm holders in particular.

The prolonged shutdown across the country has not only reduced on-farms activities but also disturbed the transport and sale of crops, vegetables and fruits, as well as the purchase of farm inputs.

Livestock, the most important sub-sector which contributes around 60 per cent of agriculture's share to GDP, is the major victim of the Covid-19 outbreak. To meet their day-to-day expenses, small farmers rear milch cattle and sell the milk. Closure of tea-stalls, sweets shops and the reduced timing for milk shops under the lockdown's standard operating procedures (SOPs) shrank demand for this highly perishable commodity and thus cut its rates.

Salahuddin, a smallholder farmer from Narang Mandi town near Lahore, says he gets 72 litres of milk from his nine buffaloes. Before the lockdown, the milkman would give him Rs80 per litre but now is not willing to buy at even Rs50 per litre citing hurdles in the onward sale because of virus issues. Likewise, owner of a known sweet shop in Mian Channu (Khanewal) has his own dairy farm but since he is disallowed to open his business because of the lockdown, he is forced to sell milk at Rs40 per litre in the town, says Pakistan Kissan Ittehad general secretary Mian Umair, who belongs to the area.

Some dairy farmers are turning towards value addition in the form of mozzarella cheese and ghee to prolong milk's shelf life rather than sell it at throwaway prices

Initially suffering at the hands of the milkman, Mr Salahuddin is now trying to find a solution through value addition: he is preparing (mozzarella quality) cheese and trying to sell it online. Even if he doesn't manage to find buyers, this will enhance the shelf life of the milk. Similarly, some dairy farmers are making desi ghee out of milk instead of selling the commodity at throwaway prices.

Closure of hotels and the ban on weddings and parties is also hurting the once thriving poultry sector. Vegetables are also being sold at low rates in the wholesale market though end consumers are not benefitting from the low prices as the middlemen are making a killer profit.

"The first month of the lockdown was particularly difficult for farmers as delinked from the markets, they had to sell their dairy and farm products at throwaway prices," says Farooq Tariq, general secretary of Pakistan Kissan Rabita Committee, a representative of smallholder farmers. "Those engaged in producing horticulture, floriculture and dairy farming were shattered with the losses for being forced to market their commodities at whatever rate offered in the local bazaar."

Hanf Hanjra, a horticulturist from Sargodha, says previously he earned a good living during the wedding and Ramazan seasons by dispatching his produce to big markets like Lahore and Gujranwala. "However, this time I'm hardly able to meet my expenses because I'm forced to sell my farm produce in the local market at much lower rates as either transport to far-off markets is not available or its charges are unaffordable." He claims he could not once cover transport charges even for the Sargodha market where his four maunds (around 160kg) of coriander was sold for just Rs70 in wholesale.

Unfortunately, the harvesting season of wheat, politically the most important crop, has also fallen in this time of social distancing. The already scarce manual labour has been further reduced because of mobility issues in the wake of the pandemic. And this gap in demand and supply has pushed up wages of available farmworkers.

“Labour is costlier this year as workers face problems crossing police check-posts erected to curtail the movement of people,” says Mian Umair. Previously, he would pay 160kg per acre of wheat to a worker for reaping his crop and now this rate has gone up to 210kg per acre. Facing issues trying to convince the mostly illiterate labour force to observe social distancing rules, he says he had to hire manpower from as far as Kasur district, more than 200km away from Mian Channu.

The farming sector was also hit because of difficulties in obtaining inputs and the shutdown of agriculture-engineering and allied industries. Though the government has permitted auto workshops to function when the wheat harvesting season sets in, the decision to allow shops of lath machines, spare parts, etc came a bit late in the day and farmers could not get their tractors, tube-wells and allied machines repaired in time. There were also difficulties in procuring medicine for cattle, bemoans Mr Salah.

Mr Tariq regrets that small farmers, one of the hardest-hit class by the lockdown, are not being considered for compensation by the government. He fears that this will lead to the compounding of rural poverty, disabling particularly the landless farmers from the purchase of seed and other farm inputs for the next crop.

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QCCI BACKS FLOUR MILLERS’ DEMAND

CORRESPONDENT May 11, 2020

QUETTA. Quetta Chamber of Commerce and Industry backed Pakistan Flour Mills Association’s demand of lifting inter-district ban on the transportation of wheat in the name of coronavirus lockdown. “Section 144 is imposed across Balochistan to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

However, the ban on inter-district transportation on wheat could cause food shortage in the province,” said QCCI Senior Vice President Badaruddin Kakar in a statement issued on Saturday. Kakar accused the provincial government and food department of deliberately causing wheat turmoil in Balochistan to ruin the provincial flour mill industry.

“Naseerabad, Jhal Magsi and Jaffar districts fulfill wheat requirements of other districts of the province. Despite the fact, Balochistan government making any policy and strategy,” said the QCCI senior vice president in the statement.

He alleged the provincial government for attempting to create wheat shortage to increase flour prices across the province. Criticising wheat procurement policy of the government, Kakar said, “Balochistan produces 80 to 90 million sacks of wheat in a year but the government announced to procure only one million sacks which will ruin the flour mills business in the province.

https://epaper.tribune.com.pk/DisplayDetails.aspx?ENI_ID=11202005110209&EN_ID=11202005110063&EMID=11202005110030

PAKISTAN'S SUGAR POLICY NEEDS REFORMS

By HARI LOHANO Published: May 11, 2020

KARACHI: In the midst of the coronavirus crisis, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government has released the probe commission report on the misuse of sugar and wheat subsidies in the country.

The report shows the power and influence of sugar barons in relation to the country's policy-making. Most of the names mentioned in the report are close associates of the PM, the PTI and the ministers in the government.

PM Imran deserves much credit for the release of the report. He has promised to take decisive action after the probe commission submits its final recommendations.

Findings of the report raise crucial questions about the government's sugar policy and the transparency of its economic policy. How does the sugar policy work? How sugar subsidy benefits only the sugar industry?

Sugarcane is a high-value, rich farmer's crop due its special characteristics. Its per-acre expenses are much higher than any other cash crop.

The time from planting to harvesting is longer. Its marketing chain, from buying seed to arranging tractor trollies for transporting it to sugar mills, negotiating price and finally getting payment, involves very lengthy processes. This favours the rich and better-off farmers as against the cash-starved small landowners.

Pakistan is among the top 10 sugarcane producing countries in the world, with plantations over a million hectares. Sugarcane production accounts for nearly two-thirds of the area in Punjab and a quarter in Sindh.

It uses more of the subsidised agricultural inputs, especially fertiliser and water, than any other crop in the economy. In a highly water-stressed country like Pakistan, sugarcane uses a much higher quantity of water than any other crop.

Between 2013-14 and 2017-18, according to the Economic Survey of Pakistan, the production of sugarcane increased by an impressive 24%, from 67 to 83 million tonnes.

During this period, the area where sugarcane was cultivated increased by 14% from 1.17 to 1.34 million hectares. The average yield per hectare, rising from 57 to 62 tonnes, shows an increase of only 8%.

The area under sugarcane cultivation in Pakistan is the fifth largest in the world after Brazil, India, China and Thailand. Its per-hectare yield, however, is much lower than the other major producers.

Its yield of 62 tonnes per hectare in 2018 was well below the world average of 73 tonnes and even below India's yield of 80 tonnes.

Figures for last year's crop (2018-19), compared with the average performance of crops in the previous five years, showed a decline of 9% in sugarcane cultivation and 6% in production. This decline is mainly attributed to late payments to farmers, shortage of water and an uncertain political environment during the 2018 election.

As in production, Pakistan is among the top 10 countries in consumption of sugar in the world and the biggest consumer of sugar in South Asia. Consumption of sugar is over 25 kg per person per year in Pakistan. In India, it is 20 kg and in China 11 kg.

Pakistan has 89 sugar mills, a much higher number than needed for domestic requirement. Some of these are located in regions where they are economically unviable and environmentally unsuitable.

Most of these mills are owned by very influential and powerful families. They belong to the governing party, the main opposition parties and the families of former generals.

At the time of Independence in 1947, there were only two sugar mills in the country. Until 1970, there were only four.

The mushroom growth of the mills was mainly during General Zia's period of office (1977-1988), when state patronage was provided to create a new business and political class to counter political opposition to his dictatorial rule. Since then, all the major political parties have followed this path and expanded it.

This growth of the sugar industry has had a very adverse effect on the country's other climatically suitable cash crop, cotton, which has been the backbone of the agriculture sector and a major source of foreign currency reserves for the country.

Between 2013-14 and 2017-18, the area under cotton cultivation declined by 4% and its production by 6%. More strikingly, when 2018-19 is compared with the average performance of the crop in the previous five years, its cultivation area has declined by 17% and production fell by two million bales or 20%.

The pricing policy for sugarcane and sugar is based on government intervention in the market through huge public subsidies, direct and indirect, at various levels of production and sale of the commodity.

At the time of harvesting the crop, the government announces a guaranteed minimum price for sugarcane, to encourage farmers to increase the area under cultivation. The government even decides about the movement of the crop – to ensure that sugar mill owners receive plenty of the produce to keep their business viable.

To protect the sugar industry further, the government imposes higher tariffs on sugar imports to “stabilise” prices in the domestic market. In general, the domestic price for sugar remains much higher than the average world price.

In addition, the government provides an export subsidy on sugar in the name of increasing foreign currency reserves.

The government's decision in September 2018 to allow export of sugar, despite early indications of low production in the country, was a continuation of past public policy to protect the industry.

Pakistan exported 0.4 million tonnes of sugar in 2016-17 and 1.6 million tonnes in 2017-18. Moreover, in 2017, during the period of Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) government, the sugar export quota was increased from 0.5 to 2 million tonnes.

There are two prices for refined sugar in the domestic market. One is the ex-mill price, which is the wholesale price at which the mill sells its product to traders and shopkeepers. The other is the retail price of sugar sold to customers at local corner shops and supermarkets – the price paid by common consumers.

The decision to export the commodity caused a hike in both these prices. The ex-mill price increased from Rs52 to Rs54 per kg in January 2019. The retail price, however, increased from Rs56 to Rs59, a rise of 6%.

With the increasing exports, prices increased regularly for domestic consumers. Even after the ban on sugar exports in February, prices remain on the higher side.

Between December 2019 and March 2020, the ex-mill price for sugar increased by 39% to Rs72. In the same period, the retail price increased by 33% to Rs80.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s April 2020 report also mentions that wholesale prices for sugar in Pakistan were over 50% higher in March than the international prices.

The sugar industry has benefitted enormously from the government's policy. In addition to the export subsidy of Rs3 billion by the Punjab government, the sugar mill owners have received extra profit to the extent of Rs85 billion – Rs5.7 billion per month from January 2019 to the end of March 2020.

The above discussion demonstrates that the government's sugar policy distorts the local market. This harms poor the most and inflicts huge costs on the domestic economy. The only beneficiary is the influential and powerful sugar industry.

At the time of pandemic and huge risks to economy, the government should refrain from intervening in the sugar market and consider reforms in the industry through parliamentary procedures and democratic practices.

In this hour of economic crisis, the government should focus more on the protection of poor and welfare of society through the provision of public goods like healthcare and strengthen the social safety nets.

The writer is a PhD from the UK and writes for The Guardian as well

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2218472/2-pakistans-sugar-policy-needs-reforms/>

HAILSTORM DAMAGES WHEAT CROP, ORCHARDS IN BAJAUR

The Newspaper's Correspondent Updated May 12, 2020

KHAR: Rain coupled with hailstorm damaged standing wheat crop, vegetables and orchards in Mamond tehsil of Bajaur tribal district, residents and officials said on Monday.

They said that hailstorm accompanied by rain started just after Iftari and lasted for about one hour.

They said that Dabar, Badan, Shah Goo, Shahi Thangi, Mokha, Kalpanim Kaga, Sewai and other hilly areas were the worst affected.

Local residents told this correspondent that hailstones were very large in size, severely damaging the standing crop of wheat, vegetables and orchards in the region.

They said that the growers were expecting good harvest of wheat crop this year, but hailstones largely damaged it.

District agriculture officer Ziaul Islam Dawar told Dawn that the hailstorm caused extensive damage to wheat crop and vegetables in Mamond tehsil.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556473/hailstorm-damages-wheat-crop-orchards-in-bajaur>

33,000 TONS OF WHEAT RECOVERED DURING RAIDS: MINISTER

By RECORDER REPORT on May 12, 2020

The Punjab Food Department has so far recovered 33,130 tons of stored wheat by raiding 436 storage places in different districts of the province.

The recovered wheat has been seized and action is being taken against the accused under the law, said Senior Minister Punjab Abdul Aleem Khan here on Monday.

The minister said that strict action was being taken against wheat stockpiling across the province and crackdown was being carried out indiscriminately against the elements involved in this heinous crime.

In a briefing session of the food department, Aleem Khan said that for the last two weeks, strict checks were being carried out on the land and river routes of Punjab where smuggling of wheat had been curtailed with the help of the intelligence agencies and Rangers.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/12/596146/three-3000-tons-of-wheat-recovered-during-raids-minister/>

KHARIF SEASON PADDY TO BE SOWN OVER 4.618M ACRES IN PUNJAB

RECORDER REPORT May 12, 2020

SIALKOT: More than 4.618 million acres of land would be brought under paddy crop during Kharif season in various rice growing areas of the Punjab.

Sources in Agriculture department told Business Recorder on Monday that the department had chalked out a well-knitted training programme to create awareness among the growers about the use of recommended seed and proper use of fertilizer to attain the fixed target in Punjab.

In this regard, the department deputed special training teams which were visiting various villages for providing proper guidance and assistance about the use of inputs, nursery sowing and transfer of plants into fields to the rice growers in the Punjab.

In Sialkot district, paddy will be cultivated on 317030 acres of land in Sialkot, Daska, Pasrur and Sambrial tehsils during Kharif season. The paddy would be sown on 91083 acres in Sialkot, 78053 acres in Daska, 103098 acres in Pasrur and 44796 acres in Sambrial tehsils of Sialkot district. Local agriculture department had initiated farmers training programme in 1442 villages of Sialkot, Daska, Pasrur and Sambrial tehsils of Sialkot district. Special training teams were busy to empower rice growers for enhancing per acre yield, sowing of paddy nurseries, utilization of irrigation water, pesticides and fertilizer as well as about the different varieties of paddy in Sialkot district, the sources added.

Some progressive farmers were adopting modern technology for raising rice nursery by automatic machine in plastic trays at local agriculture farm and ready for transplanting by 'Rice Trans Planter' in Bajwat area of Sialkot.

<https://epaper.brecorder.com/2020/05/12/10-page/836745-news.html>

TRADING ACTIVITIES RESUME ON COTTON MARKET

By RECORDER REPORT on May 12, 2020

Trading activities resume on the cotton market on Monday after the closure of more than one and a half months due to the coronavirus lockdown.

Market sources said that traders are hopeful that situation will be improved gradually after the softening of the lockdown by the government.

Cotton analyst Naseem Usman told that both federal and provincial governments should take steps to save the cotton crop from the locust attack. The recent report of Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations warned of a potentially serious food security crisis this year in several regional countries, including Pakistan, due to locust attacks.

It is expected that Pakistan's Rabi and Kharif crops will be badly affected by locust attack. According to the estimates Pakistan's economy has to bear the loss of Rs 669 billion due to the locust attack during the current year.

Naseem Usman said that Spot Rate Committee of Karachi Cotton Association has stabled the spot rate at Rs 8600 per maund. The rate of cotton in Sindh and Punjab is in between Rs 7000 to Rs 8600 per maund. The rate of polyester fiber was decreased by Rs 3 per kg and was available at Rs 157 per kg.

<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/12/596129/trading-activities-resume-on-cotton-market/>

K-P CHALKS OUT STRATEGY TO BATTLE LOCUSTS

By Our Correspondent Published: May 12, 2020

PESHAWAR: After crops in multiple districts were ravaged by locusts, the provincial government on Monday said that it has prepared an inclusive strategy for tackling the pests.

Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (K-P) Minister for Agriculture and Livestock, Mohibullah Khan on Monday presided over a meeting to review the agriculture department's response to battling swarms of locusts.

Agriculture Secretary Israr Khan, Agriculture Extension Director-General Abid Kamal and other senior officials attended the meeting.

The provincial agriculture minister was briefed on the presence of locusts and measures to control it.

The minister was told that teams have been formed at the district level where locust swarms are present.

At least 25,833 acres of land has been sprayed with insecticides in 15 districts of the province to control the locusts, the minister was told.

To further control the roving swarms of locusts, Mohibullah was told that aerial spray will also be conducted.

The locusts entered K-P through Sherani, Mosakhel and Zhobs districts of Balochistan on January 25 this year and since then have spread to several southern districts of the province.

As a result, the provincial government had been forced to impose an emergency in all locust-hit districts of K-P on January 28. The emergency was later extended to other districts of the province which were affected by locusts.

Published in The Express Tribune, May 12th, 2020.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2219416/1-k-p-chalks-strategy-battle-locusts/>

CS ORDERS GOVT DEPTS TO COLLABORATE TO COMBAT LOCUSTS

By APP Published: May 12, 2020

LAHORE: Punjab Chief Secretary Jawwad Rafique Malik on Monday directed the departments concerned to work collectively on scientific lines to combat locust. "These departments include Provincial Disaster Management Authority (PDMA), Agriculture, Livestock and Forest."

He expressed these views while presiding over a meeting to review steps to control locust in the province. Senior Member Board of Revenue (SMBR) Babar Hayat Tarar, Agriculture secretary, PDMA director general and senior army officers attended the meeting. The SMBR told the meeting that 150 vehicles and 260 motorcycle were being used for spray in locust-affected areas and so far 114,406 hectares of land had been covered.

As many as 760 solo power were also being utilized for carrying out spray, he added. He further said that a working group headed by SMBR and comprising secretaries of different departments including Finance, Agriculture, Livestock and Forest was supervising the situation.

Similarly, a core committee consisting of Agriculture DG, PDMA DG, representatives of army and Cholistan Development Authority was working against the pest.

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<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2219454/1-cs-orders-govt-depts-collaborate-combat-locusts/>

ECC READY TO APPROVE FARM PACKAGE

By Zafar Bhutta Published: May 12, 2020

ISLAMABAD: The Economic Coordination Committee (ECC), which is scheduled to meet on Wednesday, is set to approve a Rs56-billion bailout package for the agriculture sector amid the growing impact of Covid-19 pandemic.

The government has already announced a stimulus package of over Rs1.2 trillion to cushion the impact of Covid-19. Out of this, Rs100 billion has been earmarked for giving relief to small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and the agriculture sector.

The Ministry of National Food Security and Research has prepared a package of incentives for farmers in various sub-sectors of the agriculture sector to help them to cope with the impact of Covid-19. The ministry has submitted its proposals for ECC's consideration.

The food security ministry has proposed a subsidy of Rs925 per bag of di-ammonium phosphate (DAP) and other phosphoric fertilisers and Rs243 per bag of urea and other nitrogen fertilisers. Total subsidy cost will be Rs37 billion.

Agrarian dilemma: Is the smart subsidy really smart for Pakistani farmers?

The subsidy scheme will be implemented by the provinces and funds will be disbursed through the scratch card scheme, already being implemented by Punjab. The subsidy on fertilisers has been proposed for the Kharif crop (April-October).

At present, the government gives subsidy to fertiliser manufacturers on gas supply that is said to be not fully passed on to consumers. This time, the government has decided to give a direct subsidy to the farmers.

Farmers have been facing high-interest rates of up to 18.4% on bank loans. This has been a major problem that has caused losses to them over the past few years as they cannot add adequate inputs to crops.

Now, the government has decided to reduce the mark-up on loans. However, the proposed rate of interest is still high that the farmers may not be able to afford.

At present, the mark-up on agricultural loans provided by Zarai Taraqati Bank Limited is 18.4%. A reduction to 10% has been proposed for 2020 for ECC's approval. The mark-up subsidy will require Rs8.8 billion.

A subsidy of Rs150 per kg of cottonseed has been recommended for the Kharif 2020 crop season in Punjab and Sindh. This subsidy will require an amount of Rs2.3 billion.

Another subsidy of Rs300 per bag of pesticides, meant for combating white fly, has been proposed. The subsidy will cover five million acres in Punjab and Sindh, which is around 80% of the cotton area. The total cost of the subsidy will be Rs6 billion.

The food security ministry has proposed 5% sales tax subsidy on locally manufactured tractors for one year. The total cost of the subsidy will be Rs2.5 billion. Sources said the finance ministry had endorsed the subsidy for the agriculture sector.

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<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2219479/2-ecc-ready-approve-farm-package/>

CHICKEN PRICES SHOOT UP

Aamir Shafaat Khan May 13, 2020

KARACHI: Retailers have raised the prices of chicken beyond the reach of many people as the live bird is selling at Rs230-240 per kg and meat at Rs350-400 per kg, showing an increase of Rs70-80 a kilo over the past few days.

Surprisingly, the official rate of live bird and its meat is Rs138 and Rs214 per kg but shopkeepers have neither displayed the price list, nor are they selling the bird at the control rate.

Poultry retailers are demanding Rs600 for boneless chicken as compared to Rs500 per kg.

Poultry traders say that prices usually crash on low demand and soar on high demand, but here they link the price hike to a short supply of birds from farms.

General secretary of the Sindh Poultry Wholesalers and Retailers Association Kamal Akhtar Siddiqui said in last week of March, poultry industry had warned consumers regarding price hike in coming months because farmers were not putting day-old chicks at their farms owing to massive decline in sale due to closure of wedding halls, restaurants, hotels, barbecues, etc, during the lockdown which was imposed in third week of March to control spread of coronavirus.

He said wholesale price of live bird had risen to Rs210 from Rs140 and meat to Rs367 from Rs245 per kg.

“Despite price hike, poultry is still cheaper when compared with veal meat prices of Rs600-700 per kg (with and without bones) and mutton at Rs1,200 per kg,” he said adding that even good quality fish was selling at Rs700 per kg.

The government had allowed online sale of food during limited hours slightly offsetting the negative impact of low chicken sale to some extent.

A number of people prefer to make chicken-related dishes at home rather than taking risk of ordering online food in view of lingering coronavirus threat.

Consumers are now paying the price of huge losses of poultry sector's declining sales in March and April and the government's price control machinery does not exist to rescue consumers, some observers said.

The government has remained focused towards dealing with the opening of different trades and finalising standard operating procedures (SOPs) for various industries since the start of lockdown.

However, with or without price list, stakeholders had continued to challenge the government's writ in selling products on their own terms.

There is literally no fear among shopkeepers, wholesalers and product manufacturers to face any strict action like heavy fines or imprisonment against price hike, the observers added.

The Pakistan Poultry Association (PPA) in last week of March said that hatcheries had stopped setting eggs for chick production amid depressed sales.

Egg layers had also been culled, which was already showing signs of short supply of eggs.

Broiler breeders, which were consuming feed, had been sold at throwaway prices for meat.

From the above situation, birds supply in the markets would remain in short supply in coming months.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556656/chicken-prices-shoot-up>

RAHU REITERATES NEED FOR CENTRE'S HELP TO KEEP LOCUSTS AT BAY

The Newspaper's Staff Correspondent May 13, 2020

HYDERABAD: Sindh Minister for Agriculture Ismail Rahu has apprehended that locusts currently present in many districts of the province could cause heavy damage to the agriculture sector if not eliminated before rainfall.

"It's the most dangerous enemy we are faced with after Covide-19," he remarked while chairing a meeting of agriculture extension officials and later addressing a press conference at Shahbaz Hall here on Tuesday.

Mr Rahu was of the view that locusts would inflict a heavy loss to agricultural produce in Sindh and Punjab in the next few months as monsoon was approaching. The loss would ultimately cause food insecurity on a large scale, he added.

"It's a major issue as the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and other international forums have already warned that locusts could attack Pakistan 10 times this year," the minister said.

He told the meeting that the federal government should help Sindh carry out aerial spray to eliminate locusts' swarms that had already devoured standing crops and green patches in many districts and were a potential threat to remaining agricultural fields in Sindh.

He noted that the swarms were constantly attacking certain districts over the past two months.

He recalled that the federal government had declared a ‘national emergency’ in January this year and prepared a national action plan to deal with the menace in three phases. “The first phase is near completion but no significant success has been achieved so far,” he pointed out, and regretted that no effective action was being taken while only meetings after meetings on the issue were being held.

The minister quoted surveys, conducted by some international organisations, suggesting that 300,000 square kilometre area of Pakistan could come under locust attack. The areas identified in the surveys were 50pc of Balochistan, 35pc of Sindh and 15pc of Punjab. “This means that 100,000sq-km area is vulnerable and 50,000sq-km area has already come under attack or threatened by the swarms existing in Sindh,” he said.

He, however, noted that this time, locusts swarms in Sindh appeared to be in transition and that was why they did not cause a huge loss to crops but during and after rainfall, they would definitely pose a serious threat to farmlands in the province. “The swarms are flying towards India but very likely to return in the rainy season,” he said, adding that myriads of swarms did exist in Iran as well and could enter Pakistan via Balochistan.

“We apprehend a three- or four-pronged invasion by locusts from the desert areas of Sindh targeting seven districts and this would be an alarming situation,” he said.

Mr Rahu called for effective and coordinated joint efforts by his department, federal plant protection department, National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) and other relevant departments to face the challenge. He noted that the army also stood by the Sindh government in this exercise.

Explaining Sindh’s position in this context, the minister said aerial spray was the most effective method but there was only one aircraft without a pilot made available to the provincial government against the actual requirement of six each with a pilot. He said the available aircraft was meant for aerial spray in Sukkur district while five other ones were required for such operations in three other districts — Hyderabad, Mirpur-khas and Shaheed Benazirabad. Also, against the requirement of 25 sprayer-mounted vehicles, only five were made available to Sindh, he added.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556649/rahu-reiterates-need-for-centres-help-to-keep-locusts-at-bay>

OTTON PRODUCTION SLIDE

By NUZHAT NAZAR on May 13, 2020

The Federal Cabinet on Tuesday decided that the support price of cotton should be fixed after thorough consultations with all the stakeholders in order to encourage farmers to sow more and more cotton as its cultivation has been woefully declining.

Prime minister Imran Khan, who chaired the cabinet's meeting, was in favour of giving subsidies on cotton seed and fertilizer, so that poor growers could benefit.

The cabinet also decided to amend laws on appointment of heads of various government institutions and autonomous bodies in the country. It also reviewed the audit reports relating to alleged embezzlement in the affairs of Karachi Port Trust (KPT).

After the federal cabinet meeting, Information Minister Senator Shibli Faraz, while giving a news briefing, said that a seven-point agenda was discussed in the cabinet meeting.

The information minister said a committee has been constituted to frame a law with regard to appointment of heads for government entities.

He said the committee will work under the supervision of Advisor for Institutional Reforms Dr Ishrat Hussain, which will present its recommendations within a week.

He said Minister for Narcotics Control Azam Khan Swati presented 39 proposals to the prime minister on electoral reforms, which the prime minister appreciated.

The information minister said the decisions of the Cabinet Committee on Energy were ratified in the meeting, while the prime minister directed to expedite the reforms in the energy sector.

Shibli Faraz also said that the PTI is the only party, which has introduced reforms in the electoral process, while reforms in the energy sector are the government's priority.

The information minister said the cabinet approved the names of the National Commission for the Status of Women but the members would be decided by the prime minister.

He said that the cabinet had approved the application of Pakistan Essential Services Act, 1952, on all employees of the National Institutional Facilitation Technology and the approval had been given for six months.

Shibli Faraz also said that the cabinet approved the appointment of member National Accounts and member Census in the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, and also approved the audit to rectify the irregularities in the affairs of the Karachi Port Trust (KPT).

The cabinet approved the names of the members of the National Commission for Status of Women and National Bureau of Statistics.

It also approved decisions taken by the Cabinet's Committee on Energy and Economic Coordination Committee.

The information minister said the cabinet reviewed matters pertaining to audit survey regarding embezzlement in Karachi Port Trust.

Senator Shibli Faraz said Prime Minister Imran Khan also sought a report regarding illegal and unlawful appointments in 12 different ministries within one week.

Talking about the coronavirus challenge, the minister said no country in the world can afford continuous lockdown, and a decision regarding ease in countrywide lockdown was taken in view of difficulties being faced by poor labour class.

He said the government has limited resources and infrastructure, and continuous lockdown was not possible under the prevailing conditions.

The minister urged the citizens and members of the civil society to adopt all necessary precautionary measures, follow guidelines and the SOPs, and support government in its endeavors to contain the pandemic.

APP adds: The PM said all the lacunas in the election laws would be addressed so that the people's trust in the election process was restored and nobody could raise a finger on the transparency of election. A transparent and credible electoral process was the foundation of democracy and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) was the only party which had taken serious efforts and practical steps for electoral reforms.

Expressing the government's commitment, the prime minister directed to intensify efforts so that electoral reforms process should be completed as soon as possible.

Shibli Faraz said the cabinet discussed the issue of unlawful appointments made in various ministries during the previous governments. It transpired that appointments without any cabinet approval were made in 12 ministries. Expressing his serious concern, the prime minister directed all the ministries to share details in next cabinet meeting so that action could be taken on the issue.

Senator Shibli Faraz said the cabinet also approved the names of the members of National Commission on the Status of Women, including Shaista Bukhari from Punjab, Habiba Hassan from Sindh, Rubina Naz Advocate from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Fatima Iqbal from Balochistan, Madhiha Sultana from AJK, Sosan Aziz from Gilgit Baltistan and Asia Azeem from the Federal Capital.

The minister said the PM directed steps for provision of energy to the consumers at affordable rates and reduction of the circular debt. He also directed the minister for energy to complete the process of reformation in various departments of the ministry with a time line.

He said Minister for Planning and Development Asad Umar gave a briefing on the steps being taken to control the coronavirus in the country and presented the report on the situation after relaxation in the lockdown.

Imran Khan remarked that activities in the construction and other sectors had even been allowed by the developed countries keeping in view the ground realities. Keeping the economy afloat and balancing security measures was imperative, he added.

Shibli Faraz it was observed that generally the people did not adopt precautionary measures and the cabinet appealed to them to strictly follow the standard operating procedures (SOPs) as the country could not afford a surge in the coronavirus cases.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/13/596489/country-on-the-brink-of-a-wheat-crisis-pbif-chief/>

PPA OPPOSES PUNJAB GOVT'S BID TO CONTROL POULTRY PRICES

By RECORDER REPORT on May 13, 2020

Pakistan Poultry Association (Northern Region) has urged the Punjab government to allow the free-market mechanism to regulate demand and supply instead of intervening in market prices.

PPA (Northern Region) Vice Chairman Chaudhry Muhammad Fargham while talking to media persons here on Tuesday said the industry was very hurt and depressed by the Punjab government's action of controlling the prices of live chicken and meat. He claimed that the commissioner animal husbandry in the ministry of national food security had submitted cost of production to the Chief Justice of Peshawar High Court as far back as in March 2012 at Rs 31.27 for day old chicks and Rs 132.50/kg for broilers. The current costs are around Rs 45 for day old chick and Rs 160 for broilers. As per calculation of Director PRI Rawalpindi, the cost of production is Rs.145 per kg live.

The association kept the government fully abreast of the situation through different means and said it would lead to an acute shortage of poultry products as the losses would result in a reduction in production and that prices will shoot up. "We had advised the government that in the event of an increase in price, supply would partially but gradually increase to

some extent. We had strongly advised the government not to intervene in free-market mechanism but the governments paid no heed," he added.

He said now the market is allowing surviving farmers to recover their losses, the administration is arresting the sellers of chicken meat and forcing them to sell meat at Rs 260/Kg. Such actions would lead to long term closure of poultry farms, which would lead to not only a tremendous increase in chicken meat prices but also mutton, beef and pulses as well, he warned.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/13/596558/govt-committed-to-fulfill-commitments-under-27th-intl-conventions-tweets-pm/>

LOCUST ATTACKS COULD INCREASE TEN TIMES THIS YEAR, FEARS MINISTER

By RECORDER REPORT on May 13, 2020

Sindh Minister for Agriculture Mohammed Ismail Rahu has said that according to the agriculture experts of the world the swarms of locust attacks could be increased ten times more than those of the last year. He informed that the season of two main crops of cotton and rice was about to start as well as monsoon season was going to start soon which was also the breeding season for locusts as well therefore three months of June, July and August were important in this regard.

This he said while presiding over a meeting about preventive measures for Locust attacks at Agriculture Extension Office, Shahbaz Building, Hyderabad on Tuesday.

The minister further said that swarms of locusts were attacking in Sindh like last year and this danger could not be avoided. He directed the officers concerned for stopping the breeding of locusts in deserted areas of Sindh which according to him could be effective. He said that all resources would be utilized for the elimination of locusts. He asked the officers concerned to take this task as challenge and utilize their expertise and experience to eliminate locusts and save standing crops. He underlined the need for focusing Mirpurkhas, Sukkur and Shaheed Benazirabad divisions situated near to Thar Desert which was the breeding area of locusts.

He said that Sindh Agriculture Department had remained busy for elimination of locusts for one year. Rahu also directed the officers concerned to resolve the problems of growers.

Director General Agriculture Hidayatullah Chajro briefed the meeting about preventive measures for locusts.

The participants of the meeting also gave suggestions for the prevention of locusts. Director Agriculture Shaukat Hussain Mastoi informed the meeting about the present situation of Subzi Mandi and other related issues.

Later Talking to media men, the minister said that the locusts had been present in Sindh for one year and couple of days earlier locusts attacked on crops in different parts of Hyderabad Division. He said that the Sindh government was continuously trying hard to prevent locusts. He informed that the different agriculture institutes of the world issued warning of locusts attacks in our region. He said that after Coronavirus the locusts were the biggest problem for Pakistan, the situation would be worsened in coming days, as locusts from Iran and India could attack in our country, he added. He informed that 57 teams were working for preventing locust attacks and now 41 more teams had been added for this purpose. He said that we were trying to make teams ready at taluka level to spray at any time and added that a helpline

number had also been given to growers to inform about locusts' attack. Replying a question, he said that there was no conflict of Sindh with the federal government, we just demanded to federal Plant Protection Department for aerial spray.

He said that losses to crops were being estimated and soon details would be issued.

To a question, he said that due to Covid-19 the problems were being faced on wheat procurement but the Sindh government would achieve its target of wheat procurement. Replying another question, he said that due to Coronavirus, the export of mangoes would be affected.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/13/596455/locust-attacks-could-increase-ten-times-this-year-fears-minister/>

72 PERCENT OF WHEAT PROCUREMENT TARGET COMPLETED, CLAIMS MINISTER

By RECORDER REPORT on May 13, 2020

Punjab has achieved 72 percent of the 4.5 million tons of wheat procurement target set for the current year while 92 percent of 'baardana' (gunny bags) have been distributed among the farmers.

Food Minister Abdul Aleem Khan said this while replying to the questions of food department during the current session of Punjab Assembly. He said a coordinated policy has been implemented for the procurement of wheat in Punjab which has tried to bring direct benefits to common farmers. He also said that the government has ensured uninterrupted supply of "baardana" to the farmers all over the province. He said he himself is keeping an eye on wheat procurement drive and making on the spot checking of all the procedure and claimed no complaint has been received in this regard.

The Minister said that Punjab has set a target of purchasing 4.5 million metric tonnes of wheat which will be completed ahead of time. He said the Punjab government would also meet the wheat requirement of KPK by purchasing additional wheat while another 5 lakh metric tonnes is also under consideration for an extraordinary situation.

Aleem Khan assured that people of Punjab will not be facing the shortage of food grains. He claimed that the food department is fulfilling its responsibilities and all necessary steps are being taken to meet the requirements. He also answered various supplementary questions of the food department and informed the session about the steps taken by it for the betterment of this sector.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/13/596449/seven-2-percent-of-wheat-procurement-target-completed-claims-minister/>

90% BAGS FOR COLLECTING WHEAT DISTRIBUTED

By Our Correspondent Published: May 13, 2020

LAHORE: Provincial Senior Minister Abdul Aleem Khan has said that a coordinated policy has been implemented for the procurement of wheat in Punjab while trying to bring direct benefits to the farmers.

Replying to lawmakers' questions about the Food Department in the Punjab Assembly, he added that 72 per cent target of the procurement of wheat has been achieved in Punjab, while the distribution of 92 per cent bags to farmers has been completed for the purpose so far.

The minister said the Punjab government has ensured uninterrupted supply of sacks to the farmers all over the province this year. He told the house that he had inspected the wheat procurement drive and found no complaint on the ground.

He said Punjab has set a target of purchasing 4.5 million tonnes of wheat, which will hopefully be completed ahead of time. He said the Punjab government would also meet the wheat requirement of K-P besides. He said the additional purchase of 500,000 tonnes is also under consideration to meet an extraordinary situation.

The minister said illegal transportation of wheat in Punjab has been strictly curtailed and largescale operations have been carried out against hoarders without any discrimination.

Published in The Express Tribune, May 13th, 2020.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2220247/1-90-bags-collecting-wheat-distributed/>

FLOUR CRISIS FEARED AS PRICE GOES UP

Ali Hazrat Bacha May 14, 2020

PESHAWAR: The price of a 20kg wheat flour bag went up by Rs30 here on Wednesday as the local millers stopped supplies to hundreds of points selling flour in different parts of the provincial capital at subsidised rate.

Flour dealers of the main Rampura Market told Dawn that 20kg bag of mixed quality flour was sold for Rs920-Rs930 in the wholesale level against the previous rate of Rs870-Rs880 and the 20kg fine atta bag at Rs1,000.

The Bara Road wholesalers and retailers were found to have fixed the price at will.

According to the dealers, sales points were set up in different localities to provide flour to people at the controlled price of Rs808 per bag but they're closed at the moment.

They said wheat supply from Punjab had been suspended to the mills of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa leading to the closure of sales points.

Millers insist situation caused by halt to wheat supply from Punjab

The dealers said the flour price had increased in Punjab, where millers continuously demanded increase in wheat quota at the subsidised rate but the government didn't do so.

They added that the dealers of KP, too, had to purchase wheat at high price.

Meanwhile, the Pakistan Flour Mills Association, Khyber Pakht-unkhwa, has warned a halt to the grinding of wheat over the suspension of supplies at subsidised rate from the provincial government.

It also feared a severe flour crisis in the province after Eidul Fitr.

"All of our 180 flour mills are to stop the grinding within a couple of days due to ban on wheat supply from Punjab KP flour mills," association president Haji Mohammad Iqbal told Dawn.

He demanded the lifting of the ban on wheat supply from Punjab to KP to control flour price hike.

Meanwhile, the millers led by Mohammad Naeem Butt and office-bearers of the Sarhad Chamber of Commerce and Industry also held a meeting at the chamber's offices with SCCI president Engineer Maqsood Anwar Pervaiz in the chair.

They demanded of Chief Minister Mahmood Khan to intervene and ensure the restoration of wheat supply from Punjab to KP.

The millers said the government of Punjab had imposed an 'unconstitutional' and 'unlawful' ban on wheat transportation to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and that ban was a clear violation of Article 151 of the Constitution.

"Our province is deficient in wheat, so it mostly depends on Punjab to fulfil its needs," a miller said.

He said wheat supply to local mills from the government's godowns had come to a halt and that all mills would be closed under the prevailing circumstances as there was no other option to acquire wheat.

The millers said due to the unavailability of wheat on the market, they were unable to continue supplying flour to the markets at the subsidised price, which had led to the fear of flour shortage across the province.

"We had earlier warned the government to take up the wheat ban issue with Sindh, Punjab and federal governments but they paid no attention," Mr Naeem Butt said.

He added that the entire responsibility rested with the provincial government.

The miller alleged that the current performance of the provincial government, especially food department, in the prevailing circumstances was very disappointing.

Mr Maqsood Pervaiz asked the government to lift the 'inter-provincial' ban on wheat supply from Punjab to KP to ensure the timely availability of wheat to local mills and fulfil the requirement of food commodity and avert any flour crisis in the province.

He said the economic and business activities had slowed down due to the prolonged coronavirus-induced lockdown, while the imposition of ban on the transportation of wheat and unavailability of wheat for local mills would lead to the closure of flour industry in the province.

The SCCI chief said the unavailability of wheat for KP flour mills was completely unjust and unbearable and that the ban on wheat transportation should be lifted immediately.

He urged Prime Minister Imran Khan, federal food minister and secretary and other authorities to take an immediate notice of the 'unconstitutional' and 'unlawful' inter-provincial restrictions on wheat supply and ensure the smooth availability of wheat of KP flour mills.

When contacted, food secretary Nisar Ahmad said the province had a stock of over 35,000 metric tons of wheat in its godowns but that was meant for emergency situation only.

"We regularly provide wheat quota to local mills but now Punjab has stopped supplies due to own requirements, so millers have to arrange wheat privately by themselves," he said.

The official said the province's mills had to depend 80 per cent on wheat from Punjab.

“KP markets have flour in sufficient quantity but wheat supply has been stopped by Punjab due to local procurement process,” he said.

The secretary said wheat harvesting had begun in KP, so millers should acquire it to operate mills until the regular supply was made from official godowns.

He said the relevant authorities were well aware of the situation.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556928>

ECC OKAYS RS50BN FOR AGRICULTURE SECTOR

Khaleeq Kiani Updated May 14, 2020

ISLAMABAD: The government on Wednesday approved a Rs50 billion package for the agriculture sector and about Rs17bn additional funds to defence forces to foot extra fuel bills.

The decisions were taken at a meeting of the Economic Coordination Committee (ECC) of the Cabinet, presided over by Finance Adviser Dr Abdul Hafeez Shaikh, that also approved in principle a cell phone assembling policy.

The ECC was given a demand of Rs56.6bn agriculture package to provide the farmers subsidy on fertilisers, reduction in bank mark-up on agriculture loans, subsidy on cotton seed and white fly pesticides and sales tax subsidy on locally manufactured tractors as part Rs100bn earmarked for farmers and small and medium enterprises (SME) out of the Rs1,200bn coronavirus relief package.

However, Shaikh asked the food security ministry to rationalise it to Rs50bn as per its share in the overall Rs100 package announced for the SMEs and the agriculture sector.

He said the ECC had already approved a Rs50bn package for the former to provide indirect cash flow support to nearly 3.5 million people through pre-paid electricity.

Rs17bn set aside for defence forces' fuel bill

Under the agriculture package, about Rs37bn subsidy would be offered to farmers on the purchase of fertilisers. The amount would include a subsidy of Rs925 per bag on DAP and other phosphatic fertilisers and Rs243 per bag on urea and other nitrogen fertilisers.

The ECC was told that the estimated urea offtake would be around 3.04m tonnes while DAP was estimated at 0.95m tonnes for the Kharif season. The subsidy scheme will be implemented by the provinces and the amount will be disbursed through a scratch card scheme already in place in Punjab.

It was also informed that the fertiliser share in the cost of production for major crops was around 10-15 per cent and the provision of subsidy would increase their affordability to adopt the recommended level of fertiliser nutrient use and best agricultural management practices.

Similarly, under the agriculture package, a reduction in mark-up of agri loans at the total cost of Rs8.8bn, subsidy on cotton seed worth Rs2.3bn and white fly pesticides at Rs6bn were also approved.

Furthermore, the ECC called for inclusion of other banks along with Zarai Taraqiati in the scheme to enhance outreach of farmers with focus on subsistence farmers with a land holding of 12.5 acres. It was suggested that since markup had been reduced by the State Bank of Pakistan, the interest rates used in the proposal could also be rationalised accordingly.

The ECC called for the implementation mechanism, especially through the scratch card system, to be monitored carefully to ensure that the actual beneficiaries of the package were genuine farmers.

It was also pointed out that since with the provision of subsidy on fertilisers, their demand might increase, the same had to be communicated to the Ministry of Industries and Production (MoIP) in time to make arrangements accordingly.

The meeting approved a proposal by the Poverty Alleviation & Social Safety Division for disbursement of the Special Relief Package for the population living along the Line of Control in a single installment of Rs12,000 for six months from January-June while from July onwards, those families will be given monthly installments of Rs2,000 each until end of December.

The ECC took up different proposals for technical supplementary grants by various divisions and approved one by the Defence Division for a supplementary grant of Rs16.6bn to meet the expenses on POL, utilities and medical stores of the Defence Services.

In addition, it okayed Rs288m for payment of salaries to the employees of Pakistan Machine Tool Factory for the period from October 2019 to June 2020 and Rs40 million to the law ministry for employee-related costs and operating expenditures of the Federal Judicial Academy.

The ECC also discussed the Mobile Device Manufacturing Policy as proposed by the MoIP with the objectives of technology acquisition and localisation of mobile devices through domestic investment, joint ventures, FDIs, creation of 200,000 direct and indirect jobs, price reduction for consumers, increase in digitisation through supporting 4G/5G technologies, development of efficient manufacturing ecosystem, exports of competitively manufactured handsets and achievement of security objectives.

It deliberated upon various components of the policy and approved in-principle with instructions to the MoIP to further fine-tune its various features and incentives for promoting localisation and research and development leading to export of mobile phones.

Lastly, the ECC gave green signal to the release of 35,000 tonnes of wheat from the Pakistan Agriculture Storage and Services Corporation to the Azad Jammu and Kashmir government at Rs1.52bn, including the cost of wheat and incidental charges, to be paid 50pc by the federal administration from the stimulus package announced to fight against Covid-19.

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UREA SALES DECREASE BY 18PC

The Newspaper's Staff Reporter May 14, 2020

ISLAMABAD: Urea sales dropped by 18 per cent to 240,000 tonnes in April compared to same period last year due to the ongoing coronavirus lockdown and locusts attacks in several parts of the country. Overall, urea sales fell by 12pc against the previous month.

Based on the latest sales data shared by the National Fertiliser Development Centre, the urea market seems to be under significant pressure with the accumulation of 850,000 tonnes inventory due to slowdown and other stress faced by agricultural sector.

The fertiliser industry began the year with an opening inventory of 600,000 tonnes. However, the inventory has continued to soar on the back of highest-ever quarterly production of 1.42 million tonnes by the manufacturers and declining sales volume.

If the same trend continues, the urea inventory could surge to an estimated 1m tonnes by the year-end.

This weakening off-take trend, which is expected to continue for rest of the year as well, points out to supply chain disruptions in the agricultural sector and a general slowdown in economy with the real GDP growth possibly contracting by 1.3pc.

Meanwhile, according to analysts have said that to support the farmers amid the Covid-19 crisis, the government is expected to announce a mega agriculture package of Rs63.8 billion for different agriculture related sectors which are hit by the virus outbreak.

Besides the fallout of Covid-19 pandemic, the urea demand is expected to be adversely affected by record locust infestation that threatens to destroy cotton, wheat, maize and other crops.

As a result, the urea consumption is likely to decline by around 10pc to 5.2m tonnes. This demand can easily be met by the production capacity of indigenous gas-based urea manufacturers, which is estimated to touch around 5.8m tonnes in 2020.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1556945/urea-sales-decrease-by-18pc>

KP MILLERS DEMAND LIFTING OF BAN ON WHEAT SUPPLY FROM PUNJAB

By AMJAD ALI SHAH on May 14, 2020

Flour millers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have demanded of the federal government to lift ban on wheat supply from Punjab to ensure timely availability of wheat to local mills and fulfill requirement of food commodity and avert to create flour crisis in the province.

The demand was made by a delegation of flour millers, led by Pakistan Flour Mills Association Khyber Pakhtunkhwa chairman Muhammad Iqbal and group leader, Muhammad Naeem Butt during a meeting with Sarhad Chamber of Commerce and Industry president, Engineer Maqsood Anwer Pervaiz on Wednesday.

The flour millers apprised the meeting that the Government of Punjab had imposed 'unconstitutional' and 'unlawful' ban on wheat transportation to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which was clear contradiction of article 151 of the constitution of the country.

“KP is wheat-deficient province, mostly depending on Punjab to fulfill the food requirement in the province, the millers said. On the other hand, they added that wheat supply was stopped to local mills from government godowns and all mills will be shut down under the prevailing circumstances.

The flour millers said owing to non-availability of wheat in market, they are not able to supply flour to the markets, which has led to fear of shortage of flour across the province.

“We had earlier warned the provincial government to take up the issue of ban on wheat supply with Sindh, Punjab and the federal government, but they paid no attention,” Naeem Butt said. He added the entire responsibility now lies on the PTI-led provincial government.

SCCI chief said unavailability of wheat to KP flour mills is completely unjust and unbearable and the ban on wheat transportation should be lifted immediately.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/14/596771/kp-millers-demand-lifting-of-ban-on-wheat-supply-from-punjab/>

NDMA READIES TACKLE LOCUST INFESTATION

OUR CORRESPONDENT May 14, 2020

ISLAMABAD. To avert the impending locust attack, National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) Chairman Lt-Gen Muhammad Afzal on Wednesday said that arrangements have been made for timely land and aerial spray in the stricken regions.

“Around two planes for spraying-out of which one was ordered from Turkey-and five helicopters have been readied to tackle the impending locust attack in the country,” he said while addressing a press conference in Islamabad.

Experts have already warned of severe locust attack in the region. “It is predicted that Pakistan and Iran will face the worst desert locust outbreak in 50 year,” Iranian Ambassador to Pakistan Seyed Mohammad Ali Hosseini had said in an article titled ‘The challenge to food security: a new agenda for regional cooperation’.

Machines have also been installed in the suspected areas, the NDMA chairman said, adding that China has provided spray and sprayers to help Pakistan handle the situation.

Briefing about the relief activities, Lt-Gen Afzal said the government has so far procured over 100,000 tonnes of medical items from China through 11 flights. “To ensure transparency in the buying and delivery of the items all rules were followed,” he added. The government had opted to follow the self-reliant approach for making ventilators and other medical equipment after the demand and prices for such items shot up.

“Because of the NDMA efforts, the production of medical items started in local markets,” he said, “Today we are buying all the stuff from local markets that saved valuable amount of out funds.”

The NDMA chairman said the authority would review the possibility of exporting locally produced medical items after ensuring the availability of 3-4 months of stock.

Lt-

Gen Afzal said: “There is one month of stock available in the NDMA warehouse.”

https://epaper.tribune.com.pk/DisplayDetails.aspx?ENI_ID=11202005140457&EN_ID=11202005140151&EMID=11202005140049

COMMERCE ADVISER TESTIFIES BEFORE SUGAR PROBE COMMISSION

Ishaq Tanoli | Mubarak Zeb Khan Updated May 15, 2020

ISLAMABAD/KARACHI: Adviser to the Prime Minister on Commerce Razak Dawood on Thursday appeared before an inquiry commission investigating a sugar scam and recorded his statement on the decisions taken by the Sugar Advisory Board regarding export of the commodity.

The commission had also summoned Sindh Chief Minister Syed Murad Ali Shah, but he refused to appear before it and said the issue pertained to the province of Punjab.

Mr Dawood is the fifth high-profile figure to appear before the commission looking into the sudden spike in sugar and wheat prices last year. The commission is tasked with issuing a forensic audit report on the 2019 sugar and wheat crises.

Mr Dawood confirmed to Dawn that he appeared before the commission to record his statement, but declined to provide any details. He said he would not talk to the media on the issue.

However, when pressed to share some of the issues raised during the hearing, the premier's adviser said he would make his position clear on Friday (today). "I will issue a statement on May 15 to clarify my position," he said.

Mr Dawood's statement before the commission may be very important given that soon after the release of the first report on the sugar and wheat crises the prime minister took away the portfolio of ministry of industries and production from him and that of ministry of food security from Khusro Bakhtiar. Mr Bakhtiar was later given the portfolio of economic affairs.

Mr Dawood as chairman of the Sugar Advisory Board had proposed to the Economic Coordination Committee (ECC) of the federal cabinet that export of sugar might be allowed. The ECC allowed export of 1.1 million tons of sugar in October and December of 2018.

Out of the total allocation of the quota, only about 750,000 tons of sugar was exported. The average retail price of sugar was Rs53.75 per kilogram in 2017-18, Rs61.43 in 2016-17, Rs64.03 in 2015-16 and Rs58.91 in 2014-15, respectively. The price of sugar increased to about Rs80 per litre when the sugar crisis was at its peak by the end of December 2019.

An increase of Re1 in the price of sugar at the retail level means the net spending of Rs5.1 billion by the consumers. The yearly consumption of sugar in the country is between 5m and 6m tons.

An earlier inquiry report filed by the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) on the crisis had revealed the names of some bigwigs, including Jahangir Tareen, a former secretary general of the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf, and close relatives of leaders of the party's allies, who had allegedly benefited from the crisis.

However, the government constituted the inquiry commission in the first week of April and asked it to submit a forensic audit report on April 25. This deadline was later extended till May 16.

The inquiry commission headed by the director general of FIA, Wajid Zia, had requested Murad Ali Shah twice to appear before the panel.

In response, Sindh's Advocate General Salman Talibuddin sent a letter to the FIA head on Wednesday, in which he said it was evident from the findings of an inquiry committee that all acts of omission and commission responsible for the alarming increase in the price of sugar were centred in and confined to Punjab.

“Given this, we find it difficult to understand why the government of Sindh is being dragged into the quagmire created by the government of Punjab and is being asked to provide a briefing (on) the years 2017-2018 which cannot conceivably have any bearing on the task assigned to the sugar inquiry commission. For your information, during 2017-2018 the price of sugar (was) actually reduced, at least in the province of Sindh,” the letter contended.

It was evident from the inquiry commission's own report that the Sindh chief minister was not asked to appear before the inquiry committee throughout the period in which it was functioning to brief it on the issue of subsidy granted by the provincial government in 2017-18 on the export of sugar over and above the subsidy allowed by the federal government, the letter said.

It said that nobody from Sindh had featured in the inquiry committee's report as having played any part in or being responsible in any way for causing illegal increase in the price of sugar on account of the events that took place exclusively in Punjab.

“It is clear from the report of inquiry committee as well as the contents of DG FIA's letter dated March 16 that all matters falling within paragraph 3(k) of the terms of reference have been inquired into and findings in respect of them have been given and all that has been recommended now (is) the conduct of verification of the source reports through forensic audit and physical stock-taking of a few of the mills identified in the committee's report,” it added.

The provincial law officer in the letter further contended that asking the chief minister to appear before the commission did not fall within its terms of reference set out in the interior ministry's notification issued on March 16. The message asked the FIA chief to immediately withdraw his letters issued on May 11 and 13 on the subject.

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SMUGGLING, HOARDING POSE THREAT TO FOOD SECURITY: PM IMRAN

By Rizwan Shehzad Published: May 15, 2020

ISLAMABAD: Prime Minister Imran Khan was on Thursday informed of the various measures taken to make the recently promulgated anti-smuggling ordinance more effective.

While chairing a high-level meeting on smuggling, hoarding and profiteering, the premier was told that the ordinance takes stricter measures against elements involved in smuggling of currency and essential commodities.

The meeting was informed that law enforcement agencies had been empowered to take action against smuggling within five kilometres of borders and at airports. The new law also authorised relevant law enforcement agencies to take into custody elements involved in trafficking.

Further, coordination had been improved between district administration, customs officials, security agencies and law enforcement agencies so as to ensure effective prevention of smuggling.

The chairperson of the Federal Board of Revenue briefed the meeting on the steps taken thus far after the implementation of the Anti-Smuggling Ordinance.

The meeting was informed that provincial chief secretaries had been given a detailed briefing on measures to curb smuggling.

Addressing the meeting, the prime minister said that smuggling was a menace to the country's economy. He said that smuggling harms the national economy in two ways. Firstly, it poses a threat to the country's food security causing the public to suffer because of a shortage of basic necessities.

Secondly, said the PM, smuggling causes irreparable damage to the country's industries, that hampers industrial process.

He said there would be no concession or compromise on the action against smuggling.

The prime minister directed all relevant departments to submit reports on the prevention of smuggling and action taken against those involved in the act after every 15 days so that progress in this regard may be continuously monitored.

The provincial chief secretaries apprised Khan on the situation of wheat production, harvesting and overall situation.

The meeting also reviewed the prices of basic commodities, and the provincial chief secretaries also briefed the prime minister in detail about the steps taken to bring down these prices.

Reports on action taken against hoarders and profiteers by the provincial governments was also presented to the prime minister.

Minister for Industry Hamad Azhar briefed the meeting on the efforts being taken to bring down the prices of cement, steel, cooking oil and other essential items.

While directing the provincial authorities regarding possible steps to bring down the prices of basic necessities, the PM said that reducing the prices of petrol, especially diesel. by the government was to provide relief to the people.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2221423/1-smuggling-hoarding-pose-threat-food-security-pm-khan/>

FLOUR MILLERS BEGIN NATIONWIDE STRIKE TODAY

The Newspaper's Correspondent May 17, 2020

TAXILA: The All Pakistan Flour Mills Association (APFMA) has announced a nationwide strike starting today (Sunday) to protest the food department and government's behaviour towards millers, which they say violate the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between millers and the food department.

The association's vice chairman Sheikh Mohammad Saeed and other office-bearers from Punjab told media on Saturday that their mills were being raided, they were being threatened of registration of cases and imposition of fines and were not being allowed to hold wheat for grinding.

Mr Saeed said the central body of the association has called a strike, and millers across the province will stop grinding and supplying flour to markets starting Sunday until the relevant departments assure them they will not raid mills unnecessarily, and that they will allow wheat stock to be held for 72 hours for washing and grinding.

He said that the suspension of the flour supply would hit the public hard in Ramazan if the government does not address millers' grievances.

“Flour millers have given the government and food department adequate time to procure wheat from growers, but the step-motherly attitude of the administration and food department officials is uncalled for, as they are conducting raids in various districts across Punjab and not allowing even 200 bags of wheat to be held for washing and grinding,” he said.

Mr Saeed said flour millers have holding rights to store an adequate stock of wheat, but government functionaries not only confiscate the wheat but also book millers in cases, in violation of the MoU between flour millers and the government.

Sheikh Zeeshan, a member of the Punjab association, said: “We have taken the decision after receiving directions from office bearers of the central executive committee of the association to go on strike from Sunday.”

He added: “This is not a token protest, but a complete shutdown until the demands are met by concerned government departments.”

Published in Dawn, May 17th, 2020

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1557640/flour-millers-begin-nationwide-strike-today>

IMPENDING LOCUST ATTACK ON COTTON

By RECORDER REPORT on May 17, 2020

Impending locust attack on cotton is making cotton growers worry that if the preventive measures will not be taken, this year cotton yield will be low as compared to previous years. The growers of Matiari, Bhtishah, Hala and other surrounding areas of Hyderabad city are under the threat of locust attack.

The agriculture experts and civil society activists are demanding timely measures to counter locust threat. The said that it is another emergency situation for the province much like Covid-19 pandemic. This need urgent attention for fumigation campaigns against the locust attack.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/17/597740/impending-locust-attack-on-cotton/>

SUDAN INFLATION SOARS TO 99PC AS FOOD PRICES RISE

By Agence France-Press on May 16, 2020

Soaring inflation, a scarcity of foreign currency and a huge public debt are among the country's most pressing challenges.

KHARTOUM: Inflation in Sudan jumped to 99 percent because of rising food prices, official figures showed Saturday, more than a year after the country was rocked by protests sparked by bread price hikes.

The inflation rate in April shot up from 82 percent the previous month due to increased prices of grains, meat, milk and bread, according to the Sudanese Central Bureau of Statistics.

Despite Sudan's political transition, which has raised hopes of more reforms, the economy remains in deep crisis.

Soaring inflation, a scarcity of foreign currency and a huge public debt are among the country's most pressing challenges.

Many in Sudan still have to queue for hours to buy bread.

A tripling of the price of bread was the trigger for the first street protests against long-time autocrat Omar al-Bashir in December 2018.

The mass demonstrations went on for months before the army deposed Bashir on April 11, 2019.

Last month, Sudanese authorities announced an increase in bread prices, meaning one Sudanese pound (about two US cents) now buys only a 50-gram loaf of bread, compared to one weighing 70 grams previously.

<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/16/597650/sudan-inflation-soars-to-99pc-as-food-prices-rise/>

SURGING LOCUST ATTACKS POSE GREAT THREAT TO FOOD SECURITY

By Agencies Published: May 17, 2020

While the government and the urban population are struggling against the speedily spreading Covid-19, farmers in Pakistan's main food-producing pockets have been haunted by a plague of locust swarms which are sweeping green fields with their devastating instinct to eat heavily.

Locust swarms triggered panic among villagers in Punjab as their crop was fine one evening but a lot of leaves had been eaten up a day later. They fear that if the situation prevails it would finish all cash crops, animals' fodders and fruits like it did with wheat crop in Sindh.

The desert locust plague affected Pakistan's southern Sindh province last year before moving to the rest parts of the country. The Ministry of National Food Security and Plant Protection and other departments all came up with a response to the fly attacks.

Assistant Director of Agriculture Pest Warning in Chakwal district Muhammad Riaz told Xinhua that the swarm, scattered in two groups, had affected around 400 acres crops in less than 48 hours, posing a big threat to crops in the area.

According to the food security ministry, the locusts has imposed a loss of 15% to the winter-sown crops last year amounting to at least Rs100 billion, with fears that the damage would be huge if the next generation hatched.

The report added that the locust attacks could cause Rs817 billion loss to the country's agriculture production in 2020. The United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization estimates agricultural losses to Pakistan from locusts could be as high as \$2.2 billion for winter crops alone.

Earlier in January, the government imposed a national emergency on locust control. This week, the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) said the department has planned to spray 500,000-hector land because the numbers of locusts are increasing earlier and speedily.

The FAO said in its latest update that adult groups were migrating to the Indian border from breeding areas in Balochistan and the Indus Valley where hopper groups had been present as well as in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

It added the situation was also threatening in Iran where hopper bands are maturing along the southwestern coastal plains and another generation of breeding was underway on the coast near Jask and in the interior of Sistan-Balochistan province, which borders Pakistan.

In India, more adult groups and small swarms arrived from Pakistan in the past few days and moved east into Rajasthan, reaching Jodhpur. Some swarms could continue further east. Control operations are underway in all three countries.

The Iranian media quoted an agricultural ministry official as saying that Tehran might use the military for a second year to help fight locusts in the south of the country, as the swarms threaten to destroy crops worth more than \$7 billion.

Mohammad Reza Mir, a spokesman for the ministry's Plant Protection Organisation (PPO), said this week that the desert locusts had attacked more than 494,000 acres of orchards and farmland in seven of Iran's 31 provinces, the semi-official news agency ILNA reported.

The affected areas, stretching from eastern Iran on the border with Pakistan to the southwestern border with Iraq, were likely to soon increase to 1 million hectares, Mir told ILNA. "The military have promised to help fight the desert locusts, including by providing all-terrain vehicles for use in areas which are hard to access," Mir told ILNA.

PPO's head, Mohammad Reza Dargahi, said last month that locust swarms threatened 1,250 trillion rials (\$7.4 billion) worth of agricultural products across six provinces in southern Iran, the daily Financial Tribune reported.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2223232/1-surg-ing-locust-attacks-pose-great-threat-food-security/>

PUNJAB'S AGGRESSIVE WHEAT POLICY RILES UP MILL OWNERS

By Aamir Naveed Published: May 17, 2020

LAHORE: While flour mills have increased the prices of their product due to non-availability of wheat at official rates, the food department has adopted an aggressive strategy to meet the procurement target.

However, the Flour Mills Association has announced a strike in Punjab against raids on mills by the Food Department.

Pakistan Flour Mills Association's Central Chairperson Asim Raza, while talking to The Express Tribune, said that the staff of food department is harassing the owners and conducting raids on mills.

The department has allowed mills to store wheat for 72 hours of threshing but they do not even have wheat for 48 hours of threshing. Despite this, the district administration and food department officials are raiding the mills and picking up wheat.

He maintained that the officers of the food department are unnecessarily harassing the owners of flour mills to achieve their target.

He also said that wheat purchased from other parts of the province is not being allowed to reach Lahore. Raza said raids were carried out on flour mills in Multan, Dera Ghazi Khan, Sargodha, Gujrat and other areas and cases were being registered against the owners.

He alleged that after entering a mills in Sargodha, officials had asked the management to buy 50,000 sacks of wheat. Similarly, vehicles carrying wheat were being seized at the gates of mills in DG Khan. All the mills in Sargodha have been closed for the last three days.

Raza said flour mills in Sindh were buying wheat freely and also storing it, but those in Punjab were not allowed to buy wheat.

He said the provincial food department was trying to achieve its target by harassing mill owners, which was not possible. He said the owners had decided to close the mills in Punjab.

The mills have increased flour prices by up to Rs2 per kilogramme. The price of a 20kg bag of flour has gone up from Rs805 to Rs825 and that of a 10kg bag from Rs400 to Rs420.

Punjab Flour Mills Association Chairperson Abdul Rauf Mukhtar, while talking to The Express Tribune, said that per maund price of wheat in the open market had increased by more than Rs100.

The government is not releasing wheat and owners are buying wheat from the open market. At present, the per maund price of wheat in the markets is about Rs1,500.

He said flour mills are buying expensive wheat and providing cheap flour to the people. Therefore, an increase in prices was inevitable.

According to sources, the Punjab Food Department had set a target of purchasing 4.5 million metric tonnes of wheat but so far only 3.5 million tonnes has been procured.

Thus, the food department is facing a shortfall of one million tonnes in the procurement. The procurement of wheat is to be completed by the first week of June. The procurement season is coming to an end but the food department does not have time to meet the target due to the coming Eidul Fitr holidays.

Published in The Express Tribune, May 17th, 2020.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2223107/1-punjabs-aggressive-wheat-policy-riles-mill-owners/>

PAKISTAN GETS BIG SHARE IN RICE MARKETS

By APP Published: May 17, 2020

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan has attained a huge space in the global rice market for exporting local rice in potential markets of Middle East, North America and African regions to achieve the target of increasing the agricultural exports, said Adviser to Prime Minister on Commerce Abdul Razak Dawood.

Talking to APP on Saturday, he said that the government intended to uplift exports to their highest level ever and for that purpose, it was taking different measures to reclaim traditional markets besides accessing new ones.

He added that a rice delegation from Mexico would hopefully arrive in Pakistan in June to appraise various rice exporters to attain permission for exporting rice to Mexico.

The adviser said the all members of the Rice Exports Association Pakistan (REAP) should prepare themselves for this opportunity so that maximum exporters could receive approvals for orders in the Mexican market.

Dawood said that rice was the largest agri-export commodity in the country's export basket with a total value of over \$2 billion, which would be increased to \$5 billion in the next five years.

He urged the local rice exporters to introduce new varieties by investing in research and development to enhance production and quality.

Replying to a question, he said that even in the current critical situation, the country's food exports to the Middle Eastern market, especially meat and poultry, have increased compared to the same period of previous year.

Replying to another question, he stressed the need for making preparations to exploit the economic and trade opportunities expected to emerge post Covid-19 pandemic.

“We expect more opportunities to promote bilateral trade and strengthen linkages with potential markets including European Union, China, Middle East and African region besides promoting regional trade in post pandemic environment,” he said.

He underlined that the pandemic would bring a paradigm shift and will create great opportunities, adding that the coronavirus had changed the world and now the business processes would be completely different.

Dawood said that the government was focusing equally on all sectors of the economy including textile, non-textile and agriculture and engineering sectors to build export potential of the country in coming months.

Talking about the external trade situation during the past three months, he said exports had declined in April 2020 by around 54% compared to the same month of last year and the reason behind the decline was obviously the spread of coronavirus across the world.

Dawood said that the government was prioritising ‘Made in Pakistan’ policy to boost local production and reduce dependence on import and enhance exports.

Published in The Express Tribune, May 17th, 2020.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2223039/2-pakistan-gets-big-share-rice-markets/>

NEWS COVERAGE PERIOD FROM MAY 4TH TO MAY 10TH

CENTRE, SINDH LOCK HORNS OVER LOCUST THREAT

Amin Ahmed Updated May 04, 2020

ISLAMABAD: Amid allegations and counter-allegations over ways to curb the surging Covid-19 pandemic, the federal and Sindh governments have locked horns on the issue of desert locust which, if not controlled, will endanger food security in the country.

Pakistan Peoples Party chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari recently issued a statement saying that while the country is under the threat of the locust attack, National Food Security Minister Syed Fakhr Imam was ‘at large’.

On Sunday, the food security ministry came up with a rejoinder, saying his ministry was working with the department of plant protection beyond its mandate. He explained that after the 18th Amendment the federal government can deal with the locust issue from an international perspective and maintaining contacts with locust monitoring organisations.

Mr Bhutto-Zardari argued that despite numerous requests last year, the provinces were left at the mercy of desert locust. “If the federal government fails once again, the country will face another disaster in the wake of desert locust attack,” he warned.

Federation says after 18th Amendment it can deal with the problem only from international perspective

Responding to the Sindh government's allegations that the federal government was 'doing nothing' for locust threat in the province, the food security ministry said that the federal government was fully aware of its responsibility and actively pursuing the threat.

Mr Imam said instead of engaging in a blame game, all stakeholders, including Sindh, should work out a coordinated response to combat this threat. "We are confident that the nation will collectively respond in the best possible manner to the challenge at hand," while the government is in the process of revisiting the 'National Action Plan for Locust' to make it more effective and resourceful.

The ministry said that the threat of locust was not restricted to Sindh, but other provinces were also affected by it. The present locust swarm spotted in Sindh is from Koh-i-Suleman range and not from Balochistan.

As a precautionary measure, the Plant Protection Department has deployed three ground teams, one helicopter and one beaver aircraft in Sukkur.

The migration of locust will start at the end of May from Balochistan and neighbouring countries. During migration, these migratory swarms were expected to cross through the cropping area of Sindh, for which the provincial government may alert its agriculture staff to be ready for response.

In this connection, 50 officers of the Sindh agriculture department have already been trained by experts of the Plant Protection Department, according to the ministry.

With a meagre availability of aircraft, the maximum aerial control activities were undertaken on 20,300 hectares in Sindh last year, and will be continued this year.

In 2019, an area of 185,000 hectares was treated in Sindh out of a total of 300,000 hectares. To overcome the shortage of aircraft, the federal government is in the process of hiring planes for spraying. More than 100,000 litres of ULV pesticide has been stored in Sindh and a greater quantity can be provided on requirement.

The food ministry says 12 EC sprayers for the control of locust in cultivated areas have also been deployed in various districts of Sindh.

In anticipation of the possible threat, the prime minister has evoked a 'National Emergency' on locust, and as a result, a 'National Action Plan' was put into place in collaboration with the provinces. Resultantly, strong measures have been taken to survey the land areas in all the provinces in order to take corrective measures where necessary, the ministry added.

Published in Dawn, May 4th, 2020

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1554370>

PUNJAB MINISTER, ADVISER ON CLIMATE CHANGE SEEK COMPENSATION FOR FARMERS

The Newspaper's Correspondent May 04, 2020

Hail stones damaged wheat in Fatehjang on Sunday. — Dawn

TAXILA: The Punjab minister for revenue and the adviser to the prime minister on climate change on Sunday came to the support of wheat farmers from Fatehjang, Jand, Pindigheb and Hazro whose crops were damaged in the recent rainfall.

The Attock district was caught in the midst of heavy rainfall, followed by a hailstorm and strong winds, over the last two days that has damaged standing and harvested wheat crops in large parts of four separate tehsils.

Local farmers have panicked in the face of the damage; the hailstorm crushed the standing wheat crop, while rain damaged harvested wheat that was waiting to be threshed in the next few days. The wind also uprooted trees and billboards, particularly in and around Fatehjang.

Punjab Minister for Revenue retired Col Mohammad Anwar Khan said on Sunday that farmers who have suffered losses would be compensated after information is gathered from the district administration.

Heavy rainfall, hail in four tehsils of Attock district has damaged standing, harvested wheat crops

He said the government was aware of the problems facing farmers, as recent severe weather events caused by climate change have seriously affected growing crops.

He directed revenue officials from the Fatehjang, Pindigheb, Jand and Hazro sub-divisions to immediately begin damage assessment to ensure farmers are compensated in due time.

The concerned officials were directed to prepare a list of farmers facing losses due to crop damage, which would be analysed so that the area may be declared hit by calamity.

Separately, Adviser to the Prime Minister on Climate Change Malik Amin Aslam has written to Punjab Chief Minister Sardar Usman Buzdar, drawing his attention to the damage caused to wheat crops by the rain and hailstorm.

He asked the chief minister to take measures to financially compensate the wheat growers whose crop was damaged because of the unfavourable and sudden climatic agents in the area.

According to District Information Officer Shahzad Niaz Khokar, assistant commissioners of all four tehsils also visited their respective areas to analyse the damage; their reports will soon be submitted to the provincial authorities for the disbursement of compensation to affected wheat growers.

“The untimely rains also damaged wheat crop that was about to be harvested,” Jand farmer Saleem Khattak said, adding that the hailstorm that had hit the city over the weekend had spoiled wheat and maize crops in vast areas.

“We saw our crops destroyed by heavy rain and hail, which we grew with our sweat and toil for last year, and we are now even unable to pay the pending dues for fertiliser to the dealer,” Malik Tahir Ali, a farmer in Pindigheb, said. He estimated that 60pc of his wheat crop planted on five acres of land that had been ready to harvest, had been ruined.

Local farmers have called on the federal and provincial governments to declare their areas ‘disaster areas’ and provide affected farmers relief.

Published in Dawn, May 4th, 2020

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1554308>

WHEAT GROWERS DEMAND COMPENSATION FOR CROP DAMAGED BY HAILSTORM

The Newspaper's Correspondent May 04, 2020

BAHAWALPUR: After hailstorm and rain last month caused extensive damage to the standing wheat crop on thousands of acres around the Channigoth Markaz in Ahmedpur East tehsil, affected farmers have demanded the government declare the area calamity-hit and introduce monetary incentives for them.

In the areas of Channigoth Markaz, wheat crop in more than 20 villages had been damaged due to hailstorm and rain, which hit the area around March 25.

Agriculture Officer Tariq Saeed of Ahmedpur East tehsil told Dawn that as per the initial survey, 16,000 acres of wheat crop had been damaged in Hasil Larr, Laloo Naich, Ahmed Naich, Muhammad Naich, Arianwala, Tahir Wali, Mullanwali, Bast Mochian and Mahand Sharif villages.

The standing crop on about 12,000 acres had been completely destroyed, while the loss was about 25 per cent on the remaining land where farmers were able to collect hardly four to eight maunds per acre.

Besides his own survey, Saeed said the field staff, including patwaris, also carried out a survey of the rural areas to prepare their own reports of the damage.

The cultivators around Channigoth Markaz have demanded the Punjab government compensate them as their crop had completely washed away due to the hailstorm. Ibrahim Larr and other affected landowners claimed that they were left with nothing even for their domestic needs for a year.

He demanded the area be declared calamity-hit and they be compensated with cash to meet daily needs of their families, the pending payments made to dealers from whom they had purchased agriculture outputs on credit and further purchase of fertilisers and cotton seeds, writing off of interest on agriculture loans from banks, exemption from the revenue and abiana (price of water) of the perished crop by revenue and irrigation departments.

So far, the agriculture department had not yet sought any survey report of the damaged wheat crop in Ahmedpur East tehsil despite protests by the affected farmers, while similar reports had been received from the greenbelt areas the adjacent Cholistan desert.

STUDENTS IN CHINA: Fifteen students belonging to Bahawalpur division and studying in various institutions in China have appealed to the government to make arrangements for their safe return to Pakistan.

The parents of these students belonging to Bahawalpur, Bahawalnagar and Chishtian as well as students organisations have expressed concern over the government's alleged apathy towards the repatriation of Pakistani students.

According to the student organisations, the students in China were facing financial hardships, visa and passport issues as well as lack of enough food.

JOURNALISTS: The Bahawalpur Union of Journalists (BhUJ) organised a demonstration outside the press club to observe International Press Freedom Day on Sunday.

The demonstration was organised on the call of Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists and led by BhUJ Senior Vice President Akram Nasir.

CORONAVIRUS: There were currently 10 patients of Covid-19 at the government Civil Hospital here.

According to focal person for coronavirus, Dr Zakir Hussain, about 1,200 members of Tableeghi Jamaat have been discharged from the hospital.

Published in Dawn, May 4th, 2020

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1554320/wheat-growers-demand-compensation-for-crop-damaged-by-hailstorm>

WHEAT PROCUREMENT EXERCISE IN SINDH HEADS FOR A FAILURE AMID MEGA MISAPPROPRIATION SCAM

Mohammad Hussain Khan May 04, 2020

HYDERABAD: Wheat procurement exercise remains no different this year again insofar as purchase of grain from growers at official price in 2019-20 is concerned. Farmers preferred selling their crop to open market buyers who, luckily though, offered them better price.

On the other hand food department, in this mid-April physical verification of stocks, faces shortage of around 168,000 tonnes of wheat crop that is reflected in its balance books but missing from godowns of 14 districts' carryover stocks.

It means a direct loss of Rs5.46bn to the public exchequer even if wheat had been bought at the old rate of Rs1,300/40kg. In addition to it, if cost of another shortage of 62,000 tonnes of wheat is calculated, it would take the total loss to Rs7.47bn. This 62,000 tonnes of wheat is kept in flour mills by food department but mill owners adjusted it under plea bargain with the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) towards shortage of grain reported on their premises by NAB.

This misappropriation was detected during physical verification of wheat stocks in mid April, revealing a huge shortage of wheat. The department now has zero carryover stocks. "Around 168,000 metric tonnes of wheat is missing in godowns although it is reflected in record of 14 districts while 62,000 tonnes is the quantum being shown under plea bargain adjustment [with NAB]. Hardly, 26,000 tonnes of wheat is there as per verification," says a source.

The verification process ensued after food department finished its releases to flour mills and chakki owners and food officials of various districts did not provide a clear picture to the department. "It has been recommended to Sindh government to order further probe through NAB or through some other agency into this misappropriation," says another source.

Sindh government had not procured wheat in 2018-19 season on the ground that it had close to 700,000 to 800,000 tonnes of grain carryover stocks available with it. The last procurement of crop was done in 2017-18 season, therefore, recent verification proved that misappropriation was clearly there thus the panic in food ministry to buy wheat for food security.

As far the current season is concerned, the crop's major chunk is harvested in Sindh. Food department is, still, hopeful it would achieve target of 1.4m tonnes. This year farmers didn't chase food department to get gunny bags and traders offered them better price.

"There is a lot of speculation that flour price will increase. This apparently jacked up open market price of grain for wheat growers. Food department didn't follow a transparent policy for procurement, otherwise it would have achieved its target easily. Since growers are getting better price sans cumbersome procedure of food department, they remain better off by selling their grain to open market buyers", says Mahmood Nawaz Shah, Sindh Abadgar Board vice president.

The department has so far purchased 700,000 tonnes of wheat, according to Sindh Food Secretary Laeeq A. Khan. “Wheat is not buried under. It is hoarded by certain elements and we will be laying hands on them to recover it. We are optimistic we will meet the target,” Khan asserts.

Grain procurement has always been tricky in Sindh. The entire operation involves billions of rupees from public exchequer but procurement ‘season’ helps fill coffers of many. Huge expenditures from the public money are made for few reasons — to benefit farmers by paying them support price in lieu of grain, stabilise open market price and, above all, to ensure food security. But subsidy hardly reaches the targeted medium- and small-size farmers. Subsidy which comes from public purse is usually stomached by unscrupulous food officials, traders, influential growers and those who always matter in governance.

Small- and medium-size farmers end up as major losers in the race to get support price by supplying their grain to food department thanks to connivance of food department with traders or influential people. The latter get away with gunny bags to supply grain and get support price.

Early last month, food department waived condition of form-VII (land ownership document) for farmers after district food controllers (DFCs) of nine districts wrote to the department on April 7 urging it to opt for a liberal policy of purchasing wheat from ‘anybody’ besides growers if procurement target was to be met. According to them, since market price of wheat is higher than support price, the target will be impossible to meet otherwise.

The waiver was allowed after April 7 representation by DFCs, according to a document shared by one food official. Despite liberal policy, food department could not be able to meet its target although according to official claim procurement started on March 26 which otherwise begins in April.

“I found it easy to sell my wheat to traders who lifted it from my land in Matiari for Rs1,300/40kg. I simply didn’t get gunny bags for supply of my grain to food godown. So it was a better deal for me to sell it easily to traders,” says Nadeem Shah in Matiari.

Haji Ameer Bux Pahore, a veteran wheat grower from upper Sindh’s Shikarpur district, points out that on May 3, he sold his wheat for Rs1,430/40kg and on an average sold it for Rs1,350/40kg. “Usually we chase food officials to get gunny bags but this year it is vice versa. Food officials are approaching every single farmer to purchase wheat from them but stocks are not available,” he says.

Food department officials are employing strong arm tactics to get grain by hook or crook. Pahore’s fellow grower from Shikarpur, Agha Aurangzeb, complains that his 150 maunds of wheat was taken away by food officials forcibly. “I was transporting wheat to trader-cum-informal lender to settle my loan towards seed and fertilizer by adjusting it through grain,” he said.

A ‘peddy’ is an informal lender in Sindh who offers inputs to farmers and then buy their crop to settle their accounts/loans advanced to growers in shape of inputs. These are in hundreds that run informal economy in rural Sindh.

Sindh food department is, however, poised to achieve target. “A person not having ‘food grain licence’ cannot store wheat and if he does so, it will be recovered through law. We have reminded flour mills that they cannot keep a wheat stock of three months,” says the food secretary.

Now in a recent move, Sindh government on May 2 authorised them to keep their stock for 45 days. Deputy commissioners and DFCs are authorised to take action against transportation of wheat outside province, hoarding, and temporary storage/movement of wheat.

Sindh expects to have 3.8m tonnes of wheat production in 2019-20. Of the total wheat crop, the Sindh government usually procures 25pc, growers keep a certain quantum for themselves and the rest is bought by traders and roller flour mills.

Published in Dawn, May 4th, 2020

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1554270/wheat-procurement-exercise-in-sindh-heads-for-a-failure-amid-mega-misappropriation-scam>

SLOW WHEAT PROCUREMENT WORRIES CENTRE

By rizwan asif May.04, 2020

Imam warns Punjab, Sindh preventing seed companies from buying commodity may lead to a crisis

LAHORE : The federal government has expressed its concerns over the slow pace of wheat procurement in Sindh and Punjab and warned that strict measures such as preventing the private sector from buying the commodity could lead to a gap in the demand-and-supply position and increase in its price.

In a letter to chief ministers Usman Buzdar of Punjab and Murad Ali Shah of Sindh, National Food Security Minister Fakhar Imam said stopping seed companies from buying wheat could lead to a crisis in the next season.

In the letter, the federal minister noted that the provinces were cautious about meeting the procurement target, stressing that the provincial authorities needed to pick up the pace of procurement to meet the 82-million-tonne target.

The letter mentioned that there were complaints that the seed companies were being prevented from buying wheat for use as seed for the next crop, while flour mills were also being stopped from buying the commodity.

The minister noted that the provinces were cautious about the procurement target, but these measures could create seed crisis in the next season. He stressed that flour mills must have enough stocks by September to ensure availability of flour in the dry season.

The minister pointed out that with the advent of the holy month of Ramazan, there was talk of a hike in the price of flour. Preventing flour mills from purchasing wheat would create instability in the market and might widen the gap between demand and supply, he said.

Because of low wheat output estimates, hoarders, particularly those in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, had high expectations of reaping extraordinary profits. "Traders in the border areas also have high hopes," he warned.

In these circumstances, the federal minister asked the chief ministers to personally address these matters. He urged them to resolve the issues of inter-provincial wheat movement ban and the purchase of the commodity by the seed companies and the flour mills.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2213406/1-slow-wheat-procurement-worries-centre/?amp=1>

AS FARMERS PROTEST DELAY, MINISTER CLAIMS 50% WHEAT TARGET REACHED

By Our Correspondent Published: May 4, 2020

HYDERABAD: With wheat farmers in upper Sindh protesting the delay in wheat procurement by the Sindh government, Sindh Food Minister Hari Ram Kishori Lal claimed that half of the 1.4 million tonne-procurement target has been achieved.

Lal maintained on Saturday that around 700,000 tonnes of wheat had been procured from Hyderabad, Mirpurkhas and Nawabshah divisions. “The government will achieve the wheat-procurement target [of 1.4 million tonnes] in next 15 to 20 days,” he added.

Around 4 million tonnes of harvest is expected in the province this year and the provincial government has set the target of buying 35 per cent of the total crop in view of the wheat shortage last year. The provincial government did not purchase wheat in 2019.

According to Lal, the food department has bought 65 per cent of the target purchase from Mirpurkhas division. “The wheat harvest starts late in upper Sindh, where the procurement will continue throughout the month of May,” he said.

The minister further claimed that his ministry had ensured fair distribution of gunny sacks among farmers and the paper work for wheat buying had also been simplified.

Farmers in Sukkur and Larkana divisions, however, have been complaining about inordinate delays in the purchase of their crop.

“Barely half of the designated wheat procurement centres have become functional in Khairpur and that too when the harvest season is nearly ending,” complained Zubair Ahmed Phulpoto, a local wheat farmer, who led a protest in Khairpur. The protesters also opposed the posting of an allegedly corrupt officer, who faced an inquiry by the National Accountability Bureau (NAB), as the district food controller in Khairpur.

Commenting on the NAB’s inquiry report, the food minister said the alleged corruption was reported before he took reins of the ministry.

“I myself conducted departmental inquiry of the theft of 168,000 wheat bags [of 100 kilogrammes] and submitted a report to the Anti-Corruption Establishment (ACE),” he added.

The minister maintained that he had sent another report on the theft of another 194,000 bags, which were stolen from Malir and Naushero Feroze, to the Sindh chief secretary. According to him, the ACE is also conducting an inquiry of the theft.

After rampant complaints of corruption in the food department, the NAB in Sukkur initiated nine separate inquiries.

According to a recent report, NAB teams raided food department warehouses in Sukkur, Larkana, Ghotki, Nawabshah, Naushero Feroze, Khairpur, Sanghar, Kashmore and Qambar, finding 164,757 metric tonnes of wheat, worth over Rs5.35 billion, missing from the warehouses. Additionally, more than 22,000 metric tonnes of wheat, worth Rs745 million, that were sent to Karachi too failed to reach government warehouses.

During the course of the investigations, the NAB recovered Rs2.11 billion from flour mills owners and food officials, besides securing cheques of billions of rupees from another four mill owners.

Published in The Express Tribune, May 4th, 2020.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2213399/1-farmers-protest-delay-minister-claims-50-wheat-target-reached/>

4,500 SACKS OF SMUGGLED WHEAT SEIZED

By Our Correspondent Published: May 4, 2020

LAHORE: As many as 4,500 sacks of smuggled wheat were seized by the food department in Kot Chutta tehsil of Dera Ghazi Khan.

Punjab government took major action against wheat smuggling as the food department foiled the attempt to smuggle the commodity to Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa.

In another operation, AC Piplan also seized 650 sacks of wheat. Besides, 240 trucks found smuggling wheat were seized in Attock.

According to a spokesperosn, the wheat smuggling attempt has been foiled and cases have been registered.

Meanwhile, Punjab Senior Minister Abdul Aleem Khan said on Sunday that the food department in its ongoing crackdown against wheat smuggling and hoarding conducted hundreds of raids across the province and recovered thousands of maunds of wheat.

Officials said no one would be allowed to create an artificial shortage of wheat through hoarding. "Those involved in smuggling are the enemies of the country," said the senior minister. "Punjab food department is mobilised against those involved in smuggling and hoarding of wheat," he added.

As farmers protest delay, minister claims 50% wheat target reached

The senior minister maintained that all possible measures would be taken so that people don't face a shortage of flour and wheat.

He remarked that borders of Punjab were sealed and those involved in smuggling would be dealt with an iron hand.

The minister directed the district administrations, food department and other relevant departments not to bow to pressure during action against wheat smuggling and hoarding. The Punjab food department has been taking action against smuggling and hoarding of wheat in the province, whereas the district administrations took action in Chiniot, Attock, Sadiqabad and Piplan and seized a large number of wheat sacks.

*with additional input from APP

Published in The Express Tribune, May 4th, 2020.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2213447/1-4500-sacks-smuggled-wheat-seized/>

'PUNJAB TO BUY WHEAT FOR OTHER PROVINCES AS WELL'

The Newspaper's Staff Reporter May 05, 2020

LAHORE: Senior minister Abdul Aleem Khan says the government has foiled many attempts to smuggle wheat with the help of intelligence agencies and now it needs co-operation of the national highway and motorway police (NH&MP) in this regard.

Participating in the meeting of National Command and Operations Centre through video link here on Monday, Aleem Khan, who is also food minister, said the food sector in the province was being closely monitored and efforts being made to ensure that there should be no shortage of the staple crop.

He said 45 per cent purchase target had been achieved while the [procurement] drive was in full swing and the target would be achieved soon. He said wheat crop and procurement in south Punjab would be more than the target; however rains in central and upper Punjab had affected the crop to some extent. However, he said, Punjab as a whole had set a target of 4.5 million metric ton that would easily be achieved despite its seemingly large size.

Speaking about the supply of wheat from Punjab to other provinces, the senior minister said efforts were being made to ensure that there would be no two buyers in the market at the same time for the purchase of wheat. He said the Punjab government would buy wheat and hand it over to other provinces, especially Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, as per their requirements.

Mr Khan told the meeting that the Punjab flour mills were allowed to have 72-hour stock which they could refill 24 hours in advance as well. Keeping in view the past experience, he said, Punjab had replicated an integrated policy of wheat that was adopted for transportation. He said there was no restriction on inter-district transportation of wheat in the province. Similarly, he said, people could buy grains for their personal use.

The senior minister presented a comparative review at the video link meeting.

Published in Dawn, May 5th, 2020

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1554552/punjab-to-buy-wheat-for-other-provinces-as-well>

OFFICIALS EMPOWERED TO CONDUCT RAIDS FOR STOPPING SMUGGLING OF CURRENCY, FOOD

Mubarak Zeb Khan Updated May 05, 2020

ISLAMABAD: The government has empowered the authorised officials to conduct raids and search the premises of those who are allegedly involved

in smuggling of currency and essential food items in a bid to control illegal flow of goods and currency from the country's eastern and western borders.

These powers and other measures, including penalties, will be implemented through a presidential ordinance, Covid-19 (Prevention of Smuggling), 2020, for a period of four months, which upon its expiry will become a part of the federal budget for the year 2020-21.

The authorised officials can also seize goods as well as auction them in accordance with the prescribed procedures. The proceeds of the auction will be deposited in the government exchequer. The officials will exercise these powers within a distance of five kilometres from any international border or within the premises of all airports.

Action will be taken under 'Covid-19 (Prevention of Smuggling), 2020' ordinance

The Federal Board of Revenue will notify in the next couple of days all those departments, authority and agency, including security or law enforcement agencies, officers of which will exercise such powers. These include police, the

Inter-Services Intelligence, Military Intelligence, Federal Investigation Agency, Coast Guards, Intelligence Bureau, Frontier Constabularies, Frontier Corps, Levies and Rangers.

The items that will be covered within the purview of smuggling are foreign currency, gold and silver, precious stones, sugar, onions, pulses all sorts, salt, potatoes, gur, rice, wheat, flour all sorts, chemical fertilisers all sorts, livestock, maize, edible oil, hydrogenated or otherwise, therapeutic goods — drugs or alternative medicine or medical devices or biological or other related products.

The government will give reward equivalent to 10 per cent of the amount transferred to the government exchequer to informers. The amount will be raised from auctions of goods or foreign currency deposited in the government kitty.

Any person can qualify for a reward if he/she provides information to an officer with regard to any act or acts of smuggling which results in conviction and transfer of funds to the government kitty. Officials of federal, provincial or local governments cannot avail the facility of the reward.

Under the ordinance, the government has also elaborated the role of district administrations in terms of containing smuggling. Any official of district administrations not below the rank of BPS-17 can communicate information to Customs officials with regard to any contravention. The Customs officials are bound to process the information and take appropriate action.

The authorised officers can arrest a person without warrant and detain by an order in writing against those who are engaged or likely to engage in any act of transaction of smuggling or facilitate such an act or known as a habitual smuggler. The deputy commissioner will issue a detection order. The detained person can make a representation to the commissioner of the division. The maximum detection period is three months.

The people involved in the smuggling will be liable to imprisonment for a term of two years in case the value of the confiscated goods is between Rs500,000 and Rs3 million. The punishment will be for a period of three years maximum if the value of the smuggled goods is between Rs3m and Rs5m. However, imprisonment will not be less than two years.

In case the value of the smuggled goods ranges between Rs5m and Rs7.5m, the imprisonment will be a period of five years maximum. The imprisonment will not be less than two-and-a-half years.

The people involved in the smuggling will face a maximum imprisonment of 10 years if the value of the confiscated goods is between Rs7.5m and Rs10m. The imprisonment will not be less than three years.

In case the value of the smuggled goods exceeds Rs10m, the people involved will face an imprisonment term not exceeding 14 years. However, imprisonment will not be less than five years.

In the same way, the people involved in smuggling of foreign currency in the range of up to \$10,000 or equivalent in value (the currency of other denomination) will be liable for imprisonment for a maximum of two years. However, this provision will not apply to those people who will take out the currency from the country through notified routes under the Customs Act.

The imprisonment will be three years in case the value of a currency is from \$10,000 to \$20,000. The imprisonment will not be less than two years. And the imprisonment will be five years in case the value of a currency is from \$20,000 to \$50,000. The imprisonment will not be less than two-and-a-half years.

The imprisonment will be 10 years in case the value of a currency is from \$50,000 to \$100,000. The imprisonment will not be less than three years. And in case of the maximum penalty, the imprisonment will be 14 years for those who smuggle currency in the range between \$100,000 and \$200,000. However, imprisonment will not be less than five years.

Besides the existing Customs special court, the government will set up special courts in consultation with the Chief Justice of Pakistan. The power of special court will be accorded to any sessions judge or additional sessions judge and will specify their area of jurisdiction.

Published in Dawn, May 5th, 2020

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1554647>

BALUCHISTAN MILLERS SEEK LIFTING OF WHEAT BAN

Saleem Shahid Updated May 05, 2020

QUETTA: The Quetta Chamber of Commerce and Industry (QCCI) and Balochistan Flour Mills Association (BFMA) on Monday expressed concerned over the ban imposed on inter-district and inter-provincial movement of wheat since April 16.

In a joint meeting QCCI Senior Vice-President Badaruddin Kakar and BFMA Chairman Syed Saleh Agha said the ban was badly affecting flour millers and causing massive unemployment in the province.

BFMA executive members Muhammad Sharif Agha, Syed Zahoor Agha, Abdul Wahid Bareach were also present in the meeting.

The participants urged Chief Minister Jam Kamal Khan and Chief Secretary Capt (retd) Fazeel Asghar to take notice of the worsening situation in the province and immediately ensure wheat supply to flour mills on a daily basis.

“Unfortunately, this is a deliberate attempt to shut down flour mills in the province which are already unable to get wheat. It is said that wheat is being smuggled,” Kakar said.

Published in Dawn, May 5th, 2020

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1554604/balochistan-millers-seek-lifting-of-wheat-ban>

PLANT PROTECTION: YES, READ THE CONSTITUTION

By BR Research on May 6, 2020

The Pakistan People's Party is usually right when it comes to matters of the constitution. After all, its leadership can claim to have been in the driving seat during country's defining legislative moments since 1971. But party's position has been found wanting in a recent development related to plant protection; and risks making a case against devolution if it sticks to its guns.

The locust plague pre-dates the onslaught of Covid-19; in fact, alarm bells were raised of an 'unprecedented threat' by FAO's Desert Locust Bulletin as early as Jan-20 for the then upcoming spring. The same month, federal government declared a national emergency to combat locust onslaught, according to a Radio Pakistan presser. By mid-Feb, Punjab government had released a grant of Rs500 million for provincial efforts, while news reports suggest that an additional Rs 7.3 billion were set aside by the federal government for nationwide operations.

Going by news last week, it appears the worst-case scenarios have come true so far as the severity of the locust attack is concerned. The Sindh government rightfully claims that under Pakistan Plant Quarantine Act, 1976, plant protection is currently regulated under federal law. And while the federal government may have shown initiative in setting aside funds for combat operations, it has been blamed for playing favourites in disbursement. Given the prevailing political climate and state of Sindh-Federal relations, that is not entirely out of the realm of possibility. The question is, does the provincial government have any responsibility to shoulder whatsoever?

Despite claims made to the contrary, prevention of infectious, contagious disease, and pest control affecting men, animals or plant is no longer an exclusive federal domain since the abolition of Concurrent Legislative List with the 18th amendment. Case in point is The Sindh Epidemic Diseases Act, 2015; exercise of provincial executive authority under the Act have been in full display in Sindh's fight against Covid-19. Yet, when it comes to plant protection, the Sindh government has taken a diametrically opposed position. What gives?

The Article 144 of the Constitution, specifically. Since 18th amendment, the federation of Pakistan stands on the principles of residuary powers being vested with the provinces (For more, read "Understanding agriculture's constitutional arrangement", by BR Research on January 13, 2020). However, Article 144 also allows the federal government to legislate on subjects in provincial domain, with the consent of the provincial assembly, while safeguarding provincial right to opt-out of such legislation when it deems fit.

Because the 18th amendment did not repeal legislations made before its promulgation, law of continuity dictates that subjects already legislated upon continue quo ante or as before, unless explicitly legislated upon by provinces in its wake. From Pakistan Penal Code of 1860 to Coinage Act of 1906, common law is replete with precedents where existing law of the land is inherited by succeeding jurisdiction, unless amended or repealed later. Yet, the mudslinging over province-federal relationships since 18th amendment has continued ad nauseum as if the way forward is still shrouded in mystery.

It is self-evident that the arrow of devolution should only point in one direction and always march onwards. However, cherry-picking of rights and responsibilities by provincial governments in fact risks making the case for centralists; that provincial governments have struggled (if not, failed) to tackle head on the legislative challenge in front of them since the ball on devolution was set rolling. Before shirking responsibility in matters that could have been taken up by provincial assemblies, it is cautioned that provinces tread carefully.

<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/06/594541/plant-protection-yes-read-the-constitution/>

PUNJAB GOVT ASSIGNS 27 SECYS TO MONITOR WHEAT PROCUREMENT, ANTI-CORONA MEASURES

By RECORDER REPORT on May 6, 2020

The Punjab government has assigned 27 provincial secretaries to monitor the ongoing wheat procurement and activities to control Covid-19, dengue, locust and prices of essential commodities.

Punjab Chief Secretary Jawwad Rafique Malik assigned duties to three secretaries in each division and a notification has been issued in this regard. The top officials have been asked to work in a division with a view to provide relief to people. They would remain stationed in their assigned divisions two days a week and submit a report about visits to districts regularly during this period.

In this connection, the Chief Secretary chaired a meeting here on Tuesday and it also reviewed action against hoarding and profiteering, the supply chain of eatables, steps against coronavirus, dengue and locust, wheat procurement and

patients' capacity management. The Commissioner Lahore Division, Additional IG Special Branch and officers concerned attended the meeting whereas divisional commissioners and regional police officers joined through video link.

Speaking at the meeting, the Chief Secretary said the officials had been asked to work in the division with a view to provide relief to people. He directed the health department and district administrations to ensure healthcare and other necessary facilities for coronavirus patients.

According to the notification, Additional Chief Secretary Energy Irum Bokhari, Secretary School Education Sarah Aslam and Secretary Livestock Nadeem Irshad Kiyani were assigned Lahore Division. Secretary Women Development Ambreen Raza, Secretary Human Right Dr Shoaib Akbar and Secretary Housing Nadeem Mehboob would perform duties in Gujranwala Division.

Secretary Literacy Sumaira Samad, Secretary Irrigation Zahid Akhtar Zaman and Secretary Higher Education Zulfiqar Ahmad Ghuman were given responsibilities in Faisalabad Division. Secretary Communication and Works Asad Ullah Khan, Secretary Local Government Ahmad Javed Qazi and Secretary Forest Capt Muhammad Asif (retd) would carry out duties in the Sahiwal Division.

Secretary Special Education Syed Javed Iqbal Bokhari, Secretary Tourism Ehsan Bhutta and Secretary Mines Amir Ijaz Akbar were assigned Dera Ghazi Khan Division. Secretary Cooperatives Ahmad Raza Sarwar, Secretary Public Prosecution Nabeel Javed and Secretary Archives Tahir Yousaf would perform the task in Multan Division.

Secretary Energy Capt Saqib Zafar (retd), Secretary Labour Aamir Jan and Secretary Zakat Alamgir Ahmad Khan were given responsibilities in Bahawalpur Division. Secretary Transport Asad Rehman Gilani, Secretary Regulation Ahmad Ali Kamboh and Secretary Environment Zahid Hussain were assigned Sargodha Division whereas Secretary Excise Wajih Ullah Kundi, Secretary Social Welfare Zahid Saleem Gondal and Secretary Religious Affairs Irshad Ahmad were given duties in Rawalpindi Division.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/06/594687/punjab-govt-assigns-27-secys-to-monitor-wheat-procurement-anti-corona-measures/>

MINISTRY SAYS WHEAT PROCUREMENT DRIVE IS SLOW

By MUSHTAQ GHUMMAN on May 6, 2020

Ministry of National Food Security and Research has said wheat procurement drive is slow this year, suggesting that law enforcement agencies may be sensitized to curb hoarding and price hike.

During the last three years, the public sector has procured wheat on an average of 5.51 million tons against the assigned average target of 6.47 million tons showing procurement achievement of 85 per cent. However, last year the achievement declined to 65 percent of the procurement target, due the multiple factors. Considering the local consumption of 27 million tons per annum, this year public sector target has enhanced the target to 8.25 million tons, endorsed by the provincial governments.

Passco and Provincial Food Department have so far reported their wheat procurement at the level of 2.372 million tons or 28.75 per cent of the assigned targets as on April 30, 2020.

Ministry of National Food Security and Research is of the view that pace of procurement drive is slow. Punjab and Sindh have reported that their wheat harvesting at around 61 per cent and 89 per cent respectively. The Ministry has sensitized the provincial government on achieving their procurement targets. In this context two meetings were convened on April 10, 2020 and April 20, 2020 via video link, under the chairmanship of Minister for National Food Security and Research. Public sector wheat stocks are at the level of 0.616 million tons as on April 30, 2020 as compared to stocks of 3.777 million tons of the corresponding period of last year.

Ministry of National Food Security and Research has suggested that “wheat procurement monitoring committee, may rationalize its monitoring mechanism on the public sector's wheat procurement drive and Provincial Food Departments may be directed to achieve their assigned wheat procurement targets, actively. It has also suggested that law enforcement agencies may be sensitized to curb hoarding and price hike of wheat.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/06/594728/ministry-says-wheat-procurement-drive-is-slow/>

IRAN AMBASSADOR WARNS AGAINST ‘WORST’ LOCUST ATTACK

By Our Correspondent Published: May 6, 2020

KARACHI: Iranian Ambassador to Pakistan Seyed Mohammad Ali Hosseini has called for enhancing regional cooperation especially cooperation between Pakistan and Iran to tackle a massive food security challenge for the region posed by possibly the worst locust attack in 50 years.

“This year southern Iran was invaded in winter by infestations along the India-Pakistan border. The unusually warm and wet weather allowed an extra generation of breeding, meaning that the desert locust infestations would be much larger than normal and pose a major risk to the region.

“It is predicted that Pakistan and Iran will face the worst desert locust outbreak in the last 50 years. [These swarms] and can destroy all crops on their way. [They] can wreak havoc in many provinces in both countries,” Hosseini said in an article titled “The challenge to food security: a new agenda for regional cooperation.”

He said emergence of new challenges like virus originated global pandemics, climate change, pollution and infest of locusts require timely and collective response.

The envoy said the best way of preventing such horrible attack that can damage thousands of hectares of agricultural lands is early warning, spreading pesticides and countering them before breeding.

“Iran and Pakistan will enhance cooperation with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and benefit from its experiences. In the fight against the desert locusts, the Plant Protection Organization (PPO) of Iran has been reporting the situation to FAO on a regular basis.

“Iran and Pakistan should enhance the bilateral cooperation to tackle the situation. Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Iran and Pakistan are cooperating closely to enhance the connection between the related focal points,” he added.

Hosseini said Iran and Pakistan have proved during the history that they can overcome their common difficulties with joint efforts. Crippling sanctions against Iran have drastically reduced resources that were supposed to be allocated to desert locust problem, he said.

“If Iran won’t be able to control the pests, Pakistan will also be damaged. So, the subject of sanctions and its consequences is not just for Iran and needs raising our voice against the sanctions,” he added.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2214934/1-iran-ambassador-warns-worst-locust-attack/>

PAKISTAN PUSHES FOR GLOBAL COOPERATION TO FIGHT LOCUSTS

Baqir Sajjad Syed May 07, 2020

ISLAMABAD: Faced with worst desert locust infestation for a quarter of a century, Pakistan is fervently pushing for international cooperation to limit the impact of the invasion by ravenous pests while intensifying domestic surveillance and control efforts.

An official, involved in the inter-agency coordination for locust control efforts in the country, told Dawn at a background briefing that it was increasingly becoming clear that the situation was “far worse than anticipated”.

Pakistan was always on the ‘front-line’ of locust infestation in Southwest Asia because it had two breeding seasons — spring and summer — for the world’s most destructive migratory pest and also fell in the route of migratory swarms, but last year newer breeding pattern emerged with unprecedented ‘third generation breeding’, taking place and infestation spreading to districts that traditionally did not have the locust problem like Okara, Sahiwal, Jhang and Dera Ghazi Khan districts in Punjab.

According to a recent Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) report, 38 per cent of the Pakistani territory was breeding ground for the locust (60pc in Balochistan, 25pc in Sindh and 15pc in Punjab), but now the entire country was under the threat of invasion if the insects were not contained in the breeding areas.

All four provinces of the country have already reported the problem.

Simultaneously, locust numbers in East Africa, eastern Yemen and southern Iran are increasing dramatically. Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda are the most affected countries in East Africa, which is the epicentre of the crisis.

The current spread of the locusts began in 2018 and is linked by some experts to climate change. First there were two rare cyclones – Cyclone Mekunu (May 2018) and Cyclone Luban (October 2018) – that caused massive rains in the unpopulated desert on the southern Arabian Peninsula known as the Empty Quarter bordering Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Oman. Since the area was remote, there weren’t any surveillance and control measures allowing the locusts to breed in ideal conditions.

In 2019, the locusts from there moved rapidly towards South invading Yemen and Horn of Africa and also north towards Iran and Pakistan. Longer than normal monsoon last year again helped the infestation, producing three generations of the hoppers. To make the matters worse Indian Ocean Dipole – a sea warming phenomenon – caused more rains towards the end of 2019, which unusually saw eight cyclones in Indian Ocean.

“Our initial expectation was that the problem would gradually end towards the end of the last year, but that did not happen, instead third generation breeding took place,” the official explained.

This year there has been widespread breeding of the locusts in Pakistan during Spring and groups and swarms have begun to emerge. The groups have been noticed in Khuzdar, Washuk, Nushki, Dalbandin, Panjgur, Chagai Hills, and between

Gawadar/Pasni and Turbat (Balochistan); Kashmore, Ghotki, north of Sukkur (Sindh); Rajanpur, Bahawalnagar, Dera Ghazi Khan, Okara, and Sahiwal (Punjab); and Dera Ismail Khan and Lakki Marwat (KP).

According to FAO's latest forecast: "Current hopper groups and bands will form immature groups and small swarms in Balochistan, the Indus Valley, Punjab and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa that will move to Tharparkar, Nara, and Cholistan during May and June. Limited second generation hatching will occur in northern Balochistan, causing hopper groups and bands to form. Additional groups and swarms from spring breeding areas are expected to arrive along the Indo-Pakistan border during June."

Another FAO report shows that a swarm from Somalia is also expected to reach here by June.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of National Food Security and Research (MFSR) has warned that swarms of desert locust are expected to migrate from Iran and other places to summer breeding regions in Sindh and Punjab.

June is, therefore, likely to be the most difficult period when multiple swarms are expected to reach here although early arrivals will begin mid-May onwards.

Although, MFSR's Department of Plant Protection began its control efforts last year by surveying and treating large areas across the country, the first concerted national effort began this year with declaration of national emergency to control locusts on Jan 31. This brought together National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) and its provincial wings, the army and the food security ministry.

"The capacity of civilian machinery was not adequate especially because they had not dealt with a problem of this magnitude for decades. Therefore, the armed forces too had to be roped in for the national effort," the official said, and explained that the military's role pertained to logistics, data gathering and monitoring of the situation.

The federal cabinet also approved a National Action Plan for Desert Locusts 2020 -21. The plan envisioned three phases of surveillance and control activities: January to June 2020 (Phase 1), July to December 2020 (Phase 2), and January to June 2021 (Phase 3). The enormity of the situation, however, forced the government to revise the plan even before the completion of its first phase. MFSR says the plan is being adjusted to "to make it more effective and resourceful".

As of beginning of May, nearly 125,000 sq kms area in Pakistan had been surveyed and 8,900 sq kms or about 50,300 hectares of land had been treated. Much of that was done by specialized Ultra Low Volume (ULV) vehicle-mounted sprayers. Nearly, 4600 hectares have, meanwhile, been treated aeriially using a Beaver aircraft and a helicopter borrowed from army.

"Our efforts are being impeded by shortage of equipment, which we are trying to procure. We urgently need sprayers and mobile units. We also require pesticide and emulsified concentrate," the official said.

The procurement has been complicated because of the overlapping Covid-19 crisis. The manufacturers are struggling to deliver the required equipment and pesticides within the preferred timeframe because of global lockdown.

It is estimated that these procurements would cost Pakistan \$24 million.

Various scenarios have been worked out for the potential losses that could occur due to infestation. It is projected to be anything between Rs205 billion to Rs 817bn till 2021 depending on the scale of damage to the crops caused by the locusts.

Seeking international cooperation to tackle the situation is among the top priorities at the Foreign Office.

“All of our related missions are on it, pressing countries that are having or are expected to suffer from it to take action, improve coordination, share data, and exchange information on the control measures taken so far,” the official said about the diplomatic part of the effort.

Pakistan invoked FAO’s South-West Asia Commission for Locust Control in March this year. Besides, Pakistan other members of the commission are India, Iran and Afghanistan. Much of the technical coordination is being done through this mechanism, although Pakistan is also bilaterally engaging countries in this forum and others in the Arab world over the issue.

A major issue being faced in this regard is that Arab countries have not been sharing enough data about the locusts and the control measures they have undertaken. In the absence of this data, Pakistani entomologists are finding it difficult to foresee the exact impact on the country.

The official, while underscoring the need for international cooperation said, that controlling locust invasion is difficult even in normal circumstances, but these are challenging times because of Covid-19 pandemic and the scale of expected infestation.

FO Spokesperson Aisha Farooqi said Pakistan received 194,000 liters of pesticide (Malathion) and 28 high-powered spray machines in two batches from China.

Pakistan requires 381,000 liters of pesticide and 325,000 liters of emulsified concentrate. About 176 vehicle mounted sprayers are also needed.

Turkey has, meanwhile, provided Piper Brave spray aircraft. The aircraft was transported on a C-130 by Pakistan Air Force on Wednesday.

Published in Dawn, May 7th, 2020

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1555142>

ACTION ORDERED AGAINST ENCROACHMENTS, USING SEWAGE FOR CULTIVATION ON GOVT LANDS IN KARACHI

Ishaq Tanoli Updated May 07, 2020

KARACHI: The Sindh High Court on Wednesday directed the deputy commissioners of Malir and Korangi districts to take action against encroachments on government land and cultivation of vegetables using sewage.

A two-judge bench headed by Justice Mohammad Ali Mazhar also directed the lawyer for two private respondents to file comments along with relevant documents after he claimed that some land was allotted by the government on 30-year lease to private persons.

In the last hearing, the bench had summoned both the DCs along with progress reports after it was informed that vegetables and grass were being cultivated on around 290 acres of government land in the Malir River of Deh Sharabi, Taluka Ibrahim Haideri.

At the outset, both the DCs turned up before the bench and submitted their comments.

They stated that some action had already been taken for removal of encroachments from government land on the riverbed and cultivation of vegetable through sewage. However, they sought more time to file further progress reports.

DCs of Malir and Korangi undertake to continue anti-encroachment actions on state land

A lawyer also appeared in court during the proceedings to represent two private respondents and requested time to file comments.

The counsel argued that some land was allotted to his clients by the government on a 30-year lease.

However, both the DCs submitted that the land on the riverbed might not be granted to some individuals.

The bench directed the lawyer to file comments along with relevant documents before the next date of hearing with advance copy to DCs so that they would come prepared on the alleged title documents.

The deputy commissioners undertook to continue their action against encroachments on state land as well as cultivation of vegetables through sewerage water.

The bench directed both the DCs to be in attendance on May 19.

The petitioner moved the SHC stating that vegetables were being grown through sewage and industrial waste in Korangi, Malir, Landhi, Surjani Town and other areas located on the outskirts of the city and these vegetables were not fit for human consumption.

The National Highways Authority (NHA) on Wednesday informed the same bench of the SHC that it had not imposed any restriction during the lockdown period and sought time to file a written statement.

The traffic police, representative of inspector general of police and a focal person of the home department also filed replies on a petition over issues of inter-provincial goods' transportation.

NHA director (south zone) Abdul Quddus Shaikh informed the bench that they had not imposed any ban during the ongoing lockdown, but requested for time to file a statement in writing.

Rizwan Ashraf, an officer of the National Highways & Motorway Police also made a similar statement and sought time, adding that some shops were open on highways for which he would submit details in his reply.

At this, the petitioners stated that there was a provision for providing some emergency services on highways, but the Frontier Works Organization (FWO) was not taking any action.

The deputy attorney general submitted that he would call the general manager of NHA on May 13 to answer this query.

The petitioners moved the SHC and submitted that during the lockdown imposed through the order of Sindh government, there was no ban on transportation of essential goods to other provinces.

Published in Dawn, May 7th, 2020

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1555100/action-ordered-against-encroachments-using-sewage-for-cultivation-on-govt-lands-in-karachi>

PROCUREMENT OF WHEAT: ECC SEEKS PROGRESS REPORT

By ZAHEER ABBASI on May 7, 2020

The Economic Coordination Committee (ECC) of the Cabinet has expressed concern over progress of wheat procurement, and sought a detailed report on progress of wheat procurement by the PASSCO and provincial food departments, and overall wheat production backed by reliable data and figures.

A meeting of the ECC presided over by Advisor to Prime Minister on Finance Dr Abdul Hafeez was informed that, "so far PASSCO and the provincial food departments had procured 3.96 million tons of wheat, approximately 48 percent of the target, while the procurement pace was slow in KP and Balochistan, and both the provinces had been requested to speed up the procurement process".

The ECC was informed that 4.5 million tons of wheat to be procured by Punjab, 1.4 million tons by Sindh, 0.4 million tons by the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, 0.1 million tons by Balochistan, and 1.8 million tons by the PASSCO to achieve 8.25 million target.

An official on condition of anonymity also acknowledged that on wheat procurement data, secretary Ministry of National Food and Research maintained that the ministry has to rely on the data provided by the provinces and stated he would be able to inform the ECC about actual procurement in two to three weeks as the situation was evolving on day-to-day basis.

The ECC directed the ministry to submit to ECC detailed report in the next two to three weeks on the progress of wheat procurement by the PASSCO and provincial food departments and overall wheat production in the country with the help of reliable data and figures to have a clearer picture for better planning in the future and wanted the Food Ministry to closely monitor the wheat procurement process, and actively engage with the food departments and PASSCO to ensure procurement of wheat as per 8.25 million tons target set for procurement by the public sector this year.

The ECC also called for exploring possibilities for extending more time to flour mills to procure wheat from the market, allowing inter-provincial movement and preventing smuggling of wheat outside Pakistan.

The ECC gave the instruction after a report was presented to it by the Ministry of National Food on wheat procurement by the public sector in the current season.

On a proposal by the Ministry of Energy for development of a new mechanism for disbursement of payments to the tune of Rs300 billion through the CPPA-G to the power generators, the ECC directed the Power Division to devise the requisite criterion for fair and equitable disbursement of payments to the power generators and come back to the ECC for its approval.

The ECC also approved the proposal of shifting of most expensive loan from the books of Power Holding Limited (PHL) to government by taking up of Rs136.454 billion loan in the fiscal year 2019-2020 and other loans to be considered in the following financial years accordingly.

The ECC gave go-ahead to issuance of new sovereign guarantee by the Ministry of Finance in respect of fresh syndicated term finance facility for Rs41 billion through Power Holding Limited (PHL) for the purpose of set-off/adjustment of existing PHL finance facility of Rs41 billion executed in pursuance of the ECC decision made on June 07, 2017.

The ECC, on a proposal by the Petroleum Division, asked the Finance Division to transfer Rs11.7 billion in the National Bank of Pakistan (NBP) account for ensuring remittances to Kuwait as per schedule.

The ECC also considered proposal of fixing an intervention price for cotton and after a detailed discussion asked the ministry to come up with a comprehensive package focusing on cotton seed research, overall research and development, better water management, deregulation of the sector and zoning of crop growing areas to enhance productivity and competitiveness of the local crop.

Sources said the ECC unanimously dismissed the proposal of support prices for cotton and suggested that instead of support price, the research and development should be priority with emphasis on seed.

The ECC also discussed and approved five separate supplementary grants on various proposals submitted by various divisions.

On two separate proposals for technical supplementary grants by the Defence Division, Rs1.665 billion grant was approved for up-gradation of Special Telecom Monitoring Project at Directorate ISI and a Rs500 million for construction of Special Education School at the Defence Complex, Islamabad.

On a proposal by the Prime Minister's Inspection Commission, a technical supplementary grant of Rs10.476 million was approved for assistance package for the family of Raees Anwar Abbasi, senior private secretary (BS-19), Prime Minister's Inspection Commission following his death on August 12, 2019.

On a proposal for technical supplementary grant by the Poverty Alleviation and Social Safety Division, an amount of Rs12.143 million was approved following transfer of the subject of "Collection of Zakat and Ushr, disbursement of Zakat and Ushr to the Provinces and other areas as per formula approved by the Council of Common Interest" from Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony to the PA&SS Division and subsequent transfer of officers along with their posts and budgets by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony to the PA&SS Division.

On another proposal for technical supplementary grant by the Finance Division, the ECC approved Rs306.615 million for the Office of Controller General of Accounts during FY 2019-2020 for payment of dues on account of the Prime Minister's Assistance Package.

On a proposal by the Ministry of Interior, the ECC allowed the Capital Development Authority (CDA) Islamabad to allocate Rs3.05 billion to the Metropolitan Corporation Islamabad (MCI) on loan basis for payment of obligatory expenses for the second half of the FY 2019-2020.

The ECC also considered and approved a proposal for reconstitution of a committee formed by the ECC in its meeting on March 26, 2020 for examination of incentive package for the National Electronic Vehicle Policy by nominating the Minister for Industries and Production Hammad Azhar in place of Abdul Razak Dawood as chairman and member of the committee.

The ECC also considered and approved a proposal by the Ministry of Maritime Affairs for extension due to coronavirus pandemic of free period from five working days to 15 working days for cargo and containers landing for the period up to May 31, 2020.

The ECC also approved another proposal by the Ministry of Maritime Affairs for technical supplementary grant of Rs58 million as compensation of the demolished structures of Pakistan Coast Guards in order to provide 19 acres of land previously in possession of the Pakistan Coast Guards and vacated for Gwadar Free Zone and Right of Way of the Eastbay Expressway.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/07/595084/procurement-of-wheat-ecc-seeks-progress-report/>

PBIF CHIEF CALLS FOR WITHDRAWAL OF ST ON COTTONSEED

By RECORDER REPORT on May 7, 2020

President Pakistan Businessmen and Intellectuals Forum (PBIF) Mian Zahid Hussain has said that sales tax should be withdrawn on cottonseed, oil cake, etc. while withholding tax refunds stuck since a decade should be released.

He said the largest foreign exchange earning sector is in trouble, therefore it should be rescued otherwise the country will face heavy losses.

He said that the textile sector which is the second-largest job provider is facing a host of issues while the cotton ginning sector is on the brink.

Mian Zahid Hussain said that bales worth Rs20 billion are lying under the open sky as there is no buyer as many textile mills are closed due to prolonged lockdown and other reasons.

He said that textile mills have not paid Rs30 billion to ginners due to closure depriving them of the ability to pay the growers.

He noted that the issues of ginners could be resolved if TCP buys the unsold cotton stock enabling ginners to pay the growers.

Mark up should be waived from first Jan to 30th of June 2020, ginners should be allowed to sell the pledged stock, one year time should be given to adjust bank guarantees and tax should be exempted on the stock lying with ginners, he demanded.

He said that electricity should be provided to this important sector at the rate of Rs10 per unit and other relaxations should be granted to save it from collapse.

Delay in rescue will restrain payments to growers which will be a disincentive for the planters forcing them to opt for other crops which will damage the targets which will hurt the entire cotton economy which is behind 60 percent exports and millions of jobs, he said.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/07/595050/pbif-chief-calls-for-withdrawal-of-st-on-cottonseed/>

CONCEALMENT OF BILLIONS DETECTED UNDER GARB OF AGRICULTURE INCOME

By HAMID WALEED on May 7, 2020

Massive concealment of billions of rupees has been detected under the garb of agriculture income where influential individuals have neither declared income nor paid tax to the provincial authorities, said Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) sources.

According to the sources, low income tax, low water charge and high procurement prices add over Rs 200 billion to the incomes of large farmers therefore time is ripe to bring agriculture income into the effective tax net and agriculturists should be required to file income and wealth tax returns with effective use of the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) records.

The estimated additional income of big landowners due to the price support by the provincial governments is as much as Rs 90 billion, they added. According to the agricultural census of 2010, there are 13438 large land owners, representing

only 0.2 percent of the total population of farmers in the country, who own over 11 percent of the farm area. The average land holding is 435 acres.

Meanwhile, former finance minister Dr Hafiz Pasha told Business Recorder that a tentative attempt was made in Punjab and Sindh to introduce the agricultural income tax in 1997 with pressure from international agencies, especially the IMF. Initially, it was levied as a presumptive tax, linked to farm size. There as an exemption to small farms up to 1 2.5 acres in size. The maximum rate of Rs 250 per acre was set for farms exceeding 25 acres. The tax was equivalent to only about 5 percent of the average net income per acre.

Subsequently, he said, the tax was linked to net income with exemption limit of Rs 100,000 in 2001. The maximum rate was set at 15 percent on income exceeding Rs 300,000. The total national yield from this tax in 2017-18 was only Rs 2 billion, equivalent to only 0.07 percent of the net income from crops in the country. Clearly, according to Dr Pasha, not only have the tax rates been set very low but also there is substantial evasion and underassessment by the Boards of Revenue. A number of studies have demonstrated that if agricultural income is treated like any other income for tax purposes the revenue yield could be much higher. IPP (2012) estimates the revenue potential for the four provinces combined as close to 0.3 percent of the GDP in 2011-12. Based on the GDP in 2017-18, the potential revenue is Rs 103 billion. As such, large and owners pay only 2 percent of their true income tax liability. Further, given the low tax rates, there is over-declaration of agricultural income and consequently, non-agricultural income is understated and thereby under-taxed. In effect, agricultural income has become a 'tax haven'.

He said the other big advantage that large landowners enjoy is access to irrigation water at extremely low rates. The abiana, the water charge, is very low and has remained unchanged for a long time. Believe it or not, it is not even Rs 100 per acre. The O&M cost of the irrigation system is ten times as much as the revenue from the water charge. The under recovery in the province of Punjab of the cost by abiana is over Rs 15 billion. This has also encouraged the wasteful use of water at a time of emerging scarcity.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/07/595024/concealment-of-billions-detected-under-garb-of-agriculture-income/>

TRADERS REJECT PROPOSAL OF BUYING COTTON THROUGH TCP

By RECORDER REPORT on May 7, 2020

Cotton Traders has termed the decision of Economic Coordination Committee of rejecting the proposal of buying of cotton at Rs 4200 per maund through Trading Corporation of Pakistan as win of investors and defeat of farmers.

Cotton analyst Naseem Usman told that after the decision forward trading was also stopped in the market. He also said that there was already no business in the market for the last one and a half months because of the lockdown due to the coronavirus.

He said if the ECC approved the summary of support price of cotton this will prove to be helpful in increasing production of cotton in the country. He expressed his concern that this decision may affect the cotton production in the country as the farmers will loose their interest in cotton sowing.

He also said that sources had already expressed their concerns that this summary might be rejected by the ECC because ministry of National Food Security and Research and ministry of commerce are not on the same page regarding the announcement of support price of Phutti.

Naseem said that ministry of National Food Security had proposed the price in order to encourage the farmers and to increase the production of cotton. However, ministry of commerce had opposed it on the ground that if the local prices are more than international market then it will be difficult for the textile value chain to compete it with international market.

He also said that government is rejecting the long standing demand of cotton farmers of announcing the support price of cotton for the last three years. He said Prime Minister Imran Khan had also promised that government will take all measures of achieving the production target of 15 million bales. The Prime Minister Imran Khan while chairing the meetings of committees said several times that government will buy cotton through TCP.

He also said that spot rate remained unchanged at Rs 8700 per maund. The rate of cotton in Sindh and Punjab is in between Rs 7000 to Rs 8800 per maund. The polyester fiber was available at Rs 160 per kg.

<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/07/595013/traders-reject-proposal-of-buying-cotton-through-tcp/>

PAKISTAN MAY MISS WHEAT TARGETS IN ONGOING SEASON

BY SALMAN SIDDIQUI PUBLISHED: MAY 7, 2020

KARACHI: Pakistan has yet to fully recover from the wheat and flour crisis and a similar scandal is feared to occur again early next year as the government may miss the production and procurement targets of the grain in the ongoing harvesting season.

“Excessive rains and the attack of yellow leaf rust virus on the staple wheat crop in some parts of Punjab (whose share in total production stands at 70%) may have initially caused some losses,” said a Ministry of National Food Security and Research official while talking to The Express Tribune.

The government’s Federal Committee on Agriculture (FCA) had set a production target of 27.03 million tons from 9.2 hectares (22.73 million acres) in 2020.

“Overall, 2020 wheat production is expected to remain close to the five-year average (25.38 million tons), but below previous expectation of a bumper output,” Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations said on its official website the other day. The average production stands close to the total annual requirement for the grain in the country.

Agriculture Forum of Pakistan (AFP) Chairman Ibrahim Mughal said it seems impossible to achieve the production target of 27 million tons of wheat this year as farmers sowed seeds over around 21 million acres only against the target of 22.73 million acres from October 2019 to February 2020.

“The high cost of production, including higher fertiliser prices, and a low support price (minimum purchase price of wheat set by the government at Rs35 per kg for the current year) did not allow farmers to sow seeds on a larger area,” he said.

FAO said in March-April, unseasonal heavy rains and localised hail over areas of the main wheat-producing province of Punjab, delayed harvesting operations had caused localised damage to standing crops. Above-average rains raise concerns over the worsening of the desert locust outbreak, which has been present in the county since the beginning of 2019.

“The abundant rains in March/April improved vegetation conditions that, together with warm temperatures in April, could support locust breeding, with an increase in locust numbers that may damage late-planted wheat crops still to be harvested,” it said.

The 2020 wheat season had started on time last October and progressed well until February. During this period, favourable weather conditions, ample irrigation water supplies and adequate availability of agricultural inputs, such as fertilisers, chemicals, and labour, allowed farmers to plant an above-average area and had fostered expectations for bumper yields this year, it said. Last year (2019), wheat production dropped around 2.5% to 24.47 million tons compared to 25.10 million tons in the prior year of 2018. The government had set a production target of 25.6 million ton for 2019.

Moreover, the procurement was 35% (2.5 million tons) less than the target of around seven million tons by Pakistan Agricultural Storage and Services Corporation (Passco) and four provincial food departments.

The low production, low procurement and low carryover stocks from previous years had triggered the wheat and flour pricing crisis in December 2019 and January 2020 when flour price soared by Rs15 per kg to around Rs60 in retail in Karachi and other parts of the country.

It is assumed there are little or no carryover stocks available this year from the previous years, while Passco and provincial food departments may not achieve the set procurement target of a cumulative seven million tons this year as well.

“The government is procuring wheat at Rs35/kg from farmers compared to higher price being offered by traders in the private sector,” Mughal said. “The government of Punjab is procuring the grain through invoking section 144 (which bans movement of the grain by the private sector) to ensure it meets the set target,” he said.

The same wheat is being sold at Rs40/kg in wholesale and the whole-wheat flour at Rs60/kg in Karachi and other parts of the country, he said.

Another official at the ministry said such issues were not there in Sindh (whose share stands at around 14%) and the province is estimated to achieve bumper crop. “Provinces have delayed submitting initial production reports by over one-month due to the coronavirus. They were scheduled to file the reports on April 1.”

Published in The Express Tribune, May 7th, 2020.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2215788/2-pakistan-may-miss-wheat-targets-ongoing-season/>

PAKISTAN'S DIESEL SHORTAGE HITS FARMERS HARD

By Zafar Bhutta Published: May 7, 2020

ISLAMABAD: While on the one hand, the Covid-19-fuelled lockdown has turned out to be a blessing in disguise for oil traders who have pocketed billions of rupees, farmers have been hit hard.

A shortage of high-speed diesel has forced the farmers to run from pillar to post to get fuel supply for crop harvesting as its unavailability may lead to delay in harvesting. They say retail outlets are selling petrol but they are not offering diesel.

Earlier, the Petroleum Division had imposed a ban on the import of crude oil, petrol, and high-speed diesel from April 1, which was suddenly lifted on April 24. “It is interesting to note that shipments of some oil marketing companies (OMCs) arrived on the same day the ban was lifted,” remarked an official, adding that these companies had hoarded petroleum products in Karachi, which was one of the causes of diesel shortage in Punjab.

A couple of days ago, Pakistan State Oil (PSO) also warned of diesel shortage due to the manipulation of oil imports by some OMCs. Now, OMCs are tying up diesel supply with petrol in Punjab, which means they are forcing retail outlets to take supplies of petrol and other products if they want high-speed diesel.

Oil industry officials say if the government further relaxes the lockdown after May 9 by allowing public transport, the demand for high-speed diesel will swell further.

However, the Petroleum Division in an earlier statement said there was ample stock of petrol and diesel in the market. There were 285,000 tons of petrol and 350,000 tons of diesel, which were sufficient to meet the domestic requirement for the next 15 days, it said.

Moreover, two ships of PSO each with petrol and diesel had also berthed at Karachi Port, the division said. However, farmers have been left at the mercy of oil mafia as, according to PSO, some of the OMCs have imported and hoarded the petroleum products.

Industry sources say domestic refineries are operational and have ample stocks. According to available data, National Refinery Limited (NRL) had 9,768 tons of diesel stock on Tuesday but its sales stood at 5,080 tons. Pakistan Refinery Limited (PRL) had total high-speed diesel stock of 6,506 tons but its sales stood at 2,138 tons.

Industry officials say PSO is lifting maximum supplies from refineries. There was some demand from the smaller OMCs but the major issue had been created by those OMCs which imported petroleum products in April but did not supply them to the country's north.

Some OMCs influenced policymakers and imported products but they did not market them. They made hefty profits on account of petroleum development levy. Last month, PSO scrapped a tender for petrol supply at cheaper rates and accepted another tender at higher rates.

PSO's tender, for delivery in the second half of May, was opened on April 20, which had bid validity up to April 27. PSO scrapped the tender without awarding a single cargo. The lead bidder was ENOC which offered a premium of \$5.6 per barrel, followed by Gunvor with a premium of \$6.119 per barrel.

Another tender for the first half of June was floated on April 29 with bid validity up to May 6. PSO awarded two cargoes of motor gasoline (petrol) in the tender with a premium of \$9.68.

When contacted, a PSO spokesperson said the delivery period of cargoes for the two tenders was entirely different ie for the first tender, PSO was liable to lift the cargoes within the second fortnight of May while for the second tender PSO had the liberty to lift the cargoes anywhere from between June 1 and 15.

“Given the uncertainty in demand pattern due to the lockdown situation, PSO did not require cargo in the second half of May, as established during a tender review as PSO already had three cargoes arriving in May, which were deferred from April to May on the instructions of the Ministry of Energy after the fall in demand in April and to keep local refineries running by lifting products from them,” the spokesperson said.

It is pertinent to mention here that PSO even canceled the tender for the first fortnight of May 2020. It is noted that the lowest bid received in the tender for the second fortnight of May 2020 was higher than all previous tenders, the spokesperson said.

“PSO awards cargoes as per demand requirement and not merely based on premiums, as, in case of delay in the berthing of vessels, PSO has to bear demurrages as well.”

Moreover, according to the spokesperson, PSO has instructions from the Ministry of Energy to lift maximum products from the refineries and keep imports at minimum levels. “However, as per refinery availability and demand pattern, PSO

could not have survived the first fortnight of June 2020 without awarding cargoes as it is expected that after Eid holidays, the lockdown is expected to ease and consumption is expected to increase.”

Hence, the spokesperson said, comparing the two tenders of entirely different delivery periods did not have any rationale.

Published in The Express Tribune, May 7th, 2020.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2215769/1-pakistans-diesel-shortage-hits-farmers-hard/>

FOOD OUTLETS, MARKET SEALED AFTER WORKERS TEST POSITIVE FOR COVID-19 IN ISLAMABAD

Munawer Azeem Updated May 08, 2020

ISLAMABAD: A supermarket, a bakery and a restaurant located in Islamabad’s posh F-7 area were sealed on Thursday after some of their workers tested positive for coronavirus.

District Health Officer Dr Zaeem Zia told Dawn that Kabul Restaurant, Gourmet Bakery and Hatim Super Market had been sealed after it was confirmed that some of their workers had been infected by Covid-19.

According to the district health officer, the affected workers had contracted the virus from a mosque in the area. He said family members of the mosque’s prayer leader were infected by coronavirus two weeks ago.

A few days ago an elderly man, who died and was buried in Battagram, was posthumously tested positive for Covid-19. His family members were later traced who were residing in the mosque in the F-7 area. The son of the deceased was the prayer leader in the mosque and a teacher at a seminary attached to the mosque. Seven members of his family tested positive for the virus.

Both the mosque and the seminary were immediately sealed.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1555430/food-outlets-market-sealed-after-workers-test-positive-for-covid-19-in-islamabad>

ANALYSIS: SINDH GOVT REFERS PROBE INTO 168,000 TONNES OF ‘MISSING’ WHEAT TO NAB

Mohammad Hussain Khan May 08, 2020

HYDERABAD: The National Accountability Bureau (NAB) would initiate a probe into the missing 168,000 tonnes of wheat stocks in Sindh formally after the provincial government referred the matter to the bureau in a bid to ensure recovery of public money embezzled in the past few years in food godowns. The total cost of embezzlement amount by way of wheat misappropriation is being initially assessed at Rs7 billion.

“Yes, we have referred matter to NAB and it will start probing it now. Anti-corruption had earlier filed cases against food officials as well in the past. We have tried that no official having tainted background should be there at the helm of affairs now. Many of them face cases,” says a senior Sindh government officer.

The Sindh government had to refer the inquiry to NAB after realising there is no provision in the exiting Anti-Corruption Establishment (ACE) rules for “recovery of embezzled” money. The matter was initially referred to the ACE authorities under directives of the Sindh chief secretary on May 5. The ACE could fix criminal responsibility on officials concerned under law, but could not recover revenue from them.

The government wants this amount of billions of rupees recovered, considering the fact that the provincial government gets loans for the entire wheat operation from the State Bank of Pakistan each year. This year’s exercise involves close to Rs50bn amount for the procurement in which 1.4m tonnes of wheat is to be purchased in Sindh.

Only last year in the same month, NAB had finalised probe into the missing jute bags and crop in upper Sindh region, primarily in Sukkur and other districts. Cases were filed against food officials and some flour-mills owners. The owners later entered into a plea bargain. The ACE had lodged cases separately and according to one ACE official, around 20 cases were filed in courts after FIRs.

Recent misappropriation of wheat crop came to the fore when the food department decided to go for a physical verification of food godowns. The department high-ups had sought details and replies from food officials concerned, but they gave evasive replies. A pro forma was then prepared, requiring officials to submit details of stocks’ quantity and that too year-wise. “This verification in the shape of pro forma revealed that we are short of over 168,000 tonnes of wheat in 14 districts’ godowns,” said an official.

This misappropriated quantum of wheat stocks pertained to 2012-13 to 2017-18 seasons, according to one official. “Since we didn’t procure wheat in 2018-19 and last procurement was done in 2017-18, stocks had come to a naught once wheat releases to mills were finalised in March this year”, he adds.

This quantity pertains to godowns of Naushahro Feroze, Khairpur, Ghotki, Sukkur, Shikarpur, Larkana, Jacobabad, Kashmore, Qambar-Shahdadt etc, whose in-charges of different periods (mentioned above) would have to be grilled during NAB’s probe.

Actually, the government’s decision for not procuring wheat in 2018-19 led to this discovery of ‘missing’ wheat. Had procurement been done in 2018-19, the food department would not have come to know that its grain being shown in record is actually missing in large quantities from its godowns.

“We didn’t face complete depletion in the past one decade while we keep procuring new crop every year. So, we were not able to find out how many bags of wheat are available or missing,” points out a food official. He says that since this year wheat stocks completely finished and balance books indicate a different picture stock-wise, this necessitated physical verification.

The Sindh food department is still struggling to meet its 1.4m tonnes grain target for which raids were being conducted across Sindh to recover wheat hoarded by certain elements. On Thursday evening, a big quantity of wheat bags is said to have been recovered from a cotton ginning factory in Matiari in the presence of Rangers personnel.

“We will be able to meet our target as close to 0.9m tonne of wheat which has been procured,” informs one official. He adds that around four million tonnes production is likely in Sindh this year against the target of 3.8m tonnes.

While the food department has accelerated its pace of recovery for what it says is hoarded wheat, it was not able to buy required 1.4m tonnes of procurement at the support price of Rs1,400/40kg during peak harvesting season. The department’s official storage capacity varies between 700,000-800,000 tonnes of wheat while rest of procured wheat is kept in flour mills or private premises under improvised conditions. The food department is yet to enhance its storage capacity to stock the grain it buys from growers every season.

Sindh's farmers sold their wheat to traders who lifted grain from their field and made cash payments. Growers always want quick payments to take care of next crop of summer season which is something not possible with food department due to government's procedural formalities.

Around 8.25m tonnes of wheat crop is to be procured in the country in 2019-20 season inclusive of procurement by the Pakistan Agriculture Storages and Services Corporation (Passco). Sindh agriculture department has received reports that while 70pc to 80pc wheat has been harvested in the province there are also reports about low per-acre productivity in upper Sindh. "Crop ... is healthy but some disturbing reports are also received about size of grain which contributes to low per-acre productivity. But we are hopeful that production target will hopefully be met", says an official.

Published in Dawn, May 8th, 2020

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1555377>

COTTON CROP 2020-21: PKI TERMS REJECTION OF INTERVENTION PRICE AS 'VICTORY OF MAFIA'

By RECORDER REPORT on May 8, 2020

Pakistan Kissan Ittehad (PKI) has termed the rejection of intervention price for cotton crop 2020-21 as victory of the mafia, which has representation in the Economic Coordination Committee (ECC) of the Cabinet.

"It is a black day for the growers in general and the cotton growers in particular as in the battle of industry and agriculture once again industry has defeated agriculture with full force," said Khalid Khokhar, PKI President.

On May 7, 2020, ECC rejected a proposal of Ministry of National Food Security and Research in which intervention price of seed cotton (Phutti) was proposed at Rs 4,224/40kg.

"In the battle with the textile industry, growers who want fair price of their produce, have lost the battle against the strong lobby that has taken over the forum and got a decision in their favor," Khokhar added.

He was of the view that industry, every year pays far less price for cotton amounting to Rs 34.63 billion to the cotton growers in the name of "free market economy" which in reality is a monopoly.

The grower has been demanding their right to a fair price of their produce for long but every time the strong lobby prevails. This year with Syed Fakhar Imam in the chair as Minister for NFS&R was requested by farmers' bodies to announce the support price well in advance so that decision on cotton sowing could be taken appropriately.

The cotton area is declining by 20 percent Punjab since 2010 whereas the area under maize and sugarcane has been increased by 66 percent and 37 percent respectively.

He said water as a limiting factor for Pakistan had to be utilised wisely and high delta crops like rice, maize, and sugarcane must be replaced by low water requiring crops like cotton, oilseed, and pulses, Pakistan is spending billions of dollars on import of these commodities.

Syed Fakhar Imam, a cotton grower himself, with extensive consultation, placed a proposal to ECC on May 6, 2020 which was rejected with an overwhelming majority with the excuse that cotton production is a provincial subject after 18th amendment, and the government is already trying to get rid of wheat support price and sugar indicative price.

“The decision shows a bleak future for cotton in Pakistan with industry having a strong lobby with the decision-makers who do not want to see cotton and agriculture prosper in Pakistan,” he continued.

The world has learned lessons during the current Covid-19 outbreak and realised that everything comes after food security and agriculture, unfortunately, Pakistanis have not learned the lesson or are intentionally ignoring it.

Khalid Khokhar argued that after Atomic Testing and 9/11 Pakistan faced the worst sanctions but “since we had surplus in farm production Pakistan survived. During the current Covid-19 crisis Pakistan had enough of food commodities, so there is no panic like situation in the country.

“We the Pakistan Kissan Ittehad as our last hope, request Prime Minister Imran Khan who has shown his commitments to strike against mafias and cartels to personally intervene and support farmers at this very crucial time,” he concluded.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/08/595303/cotton-crop-2020-21-pki-terms-rejection-of-intervention-price-as-victory-of-mafia/>

PLAN AFOOT TO ESTABLISH AGRI MECHANICAL COMPLEX: MINISTER

Jamal Shahid May 09, 2020

ISLAMABAD: Minister for Science and Technology Fawad Chaudhry on Friday shared his plans with Prime Minister Imran Khan to establish an agricultural mechanical complex aimed at utilising new technologies to enhance yields.

The minister met the prime minister to discuss future initiatives in the field of science and technology.

He also briefed the prime minister about the Bio-technology Park in Jehlum and took up various administrative hurdles in its establishment.

He also informed the prime minister that the ministry also planned to transform all police stations in the capital city into high-tech establishments in six months.

“There is a need to modernise police stations across the country. However, we will start with ten police stations in Islamabad initially and turn them into high-tech setups,” Fawad Chaudhry said in a video message after his meeting with the prime minister.

However, he did not share how the government planned to modernise the police stations.

He assured that citizens would soon see how latest technologies would improve the police and the services it provides to the people.

The work on the pilot project of modernisation of police stations in Islamabad has started and would be completed in the next six months.

According to the minister, the Ministry of Science and Technology was now a brand name after necessary attention was given to it and its important role has been realized in combating the coronavirus pandemic.

Fawad Chaudhry also briefed the prime minister on the Made in Pakistan initiative and the numerous coronavirus fighting products that are being established under this programme.

He informed the prime minister that while face masks to protect against coronavirus are already being produced locally and are available in the market, other equipment such as ventilators and personal protective equipment (PPE) and testing kits will soon be manufactured by local industries using indigenous technologies.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1555666/plan-afoot-to-establish-agri-mechanical-complex-minister>

WEIGHT OF SUGARCANE: SUGAR MILLS INVOLVED IN ‘ILLEGAL’ DEDUCTION?

By MUSHTAQ GHUMMAN on May 9, 2020

The Sugar Inquiry Commission is said to have found sugar mills involved in “illegal” deduction in weight of sugarcane under the garb of binding (Bandhan) top, trash and mud aimed at fleecing the growers, well-informed sources told Business Recorder.

The second encounter between Pakistan Sugar Mills Association (PSMA) and a high-powered Inquiry Commission is scheduled for Saturday (today). Insiders claim that both sides are prepared to challenge the claims of the other. The inquiry team has prepared over 100 questions to be asked from the PSM representatives. Unconfirmed reports suggest that the Inquiry team has also summoned the representatives of 10 mills separately for seeking their viewpoints on the accusations.

FIA Deputy Director Muhammad Ahmad, in a recent letter to Cane Commissioner Punjab in his response stated that “under section 13(16) of the Punjab Sugar Factories Control Act, 1950, no deduction shall be made from the weight of cane on the ground that the cane is improperly stripped or on any other ground whatsoever, unless approved by the Cane Commissioner.”

It was further stated in the reply of Cane Commissioner, “no any direction of Cane Commissioner Office regarding deduction in weight on pretext of binding (Bandhan) Top, Trash and Mud was issued. However, the meeting of the Committee on sugar sector held on December 27, 2018 allowed deduction in weight on account of Top, Trash upto 3 per cent and upto maximum 5 per cent in case of banned / unapproved varieties.”

FIA is of the view that Hunza Sugar Mills(Pvt.) Limited made deduction in weight on account of Top, Trash and mud and poor quality etc., the quantum of deductions made by both units is as follows:(i) year 2017-18, unit-I, deduction 512,798 mounds and unit-II, 20, 229 mounds;(ii) in 2018-19, unit-I deduction was 25,273 mounds and unit-II 3,417 mounds and;(iii) 2019-20, unit-I, 4537 mounds and unit-II 2,278 mounds.

The Inquiry Commission has sought the following clarification: (i) whether the deductions are legal and justified to the provisions of the section 13(16) of the Punjab Sugar Factories Control Rules, 1950; (ii) whether mere issuance/circulation of minutes of a meeting are sufficient to allow deduction which are in fact not allowed under section 16 of the Punjab Sugar Factories Control Act, 1950 read with section 13(6) of the Punjab Factories Control Act, 1950 and ;(iii) whether, notification for any such deduction etc, is mandatory provision, if it is mandatory than why deduction in weight was allowed through circulation of minutes of meeting of December 27, 2018.

According to official documents, the Inquiry Commission has also included the issue of tax evasion in the ongoing forensic audit and asked 10 sugar mills to provide details about the road cess and market committee taxes of the last five years.

Those mills which have invested in foreign countries to buy stakes in sugar mills will also be quizzed. In addition, the mills which got licence to produce sugar on sugar beet but instead they crushed cane in violation of licence are also on the radar of Inquiry Commission.

Unconfirmed reports also suggest that someone has transferred millions of rupees in different accounts of mill partners, who invested in "collaboration" with a German-based company. At least five or six sugar dealers have also assured complete cooperation to the Inquiry Commission in case they are not dealt harshly. Sugar brokers Association has accused officials of mishandling its members. However, Chairman of the Commission has assured them that no official will be involved in physical intervention in any case.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/09/595607/weight-of-sugarcane-sugar-mills-involved-in-illegal-deduction/>

EXPORTERS URGE MINISTRY TO EXTEND DEADLINE OF MANGO EXPORT

By RECORDER REPORT on May 9, 2020

Exporters have requested the Ministry of Commerce to extend the date of export of mango by further twelve days fixing it at 1st June 2020 as the climatic change and lockdown have severely affected the mango crops.

The Ministry of Commerce has fixed date of export of mango as 20th May for the current year, however due to the crops' immaturity by this given date if the export of mango commences, it would badly hurt export of mango from Pakistan.

According to Pakistan Fruit & Vegetable Exporters Association (PFVA) the mango crops in Sindh and Punjab is likely to get matured after a delay of two weeks and the season of mango slides further to a couple of weeks due to non-availability of required level of temperature and humid climate.

The PFVA, ahead of these factors, has requested the Ministry of Commerce to extend the date of export of mango by further twelve days from May 20 to June 1st 2020.

Waheed Ahmed Patron-in-Chief PFVA said that the climatic change has started taking heavy toll of its devastating effects by impacting major agriculture crops besides Fruits as well. The mango crop usually gets mature by middle of May; however it's strongly anticipated to be delayed by two weeks this year and exporting pre-matured mango would not be beneficial.

On other hand due to lockdown adequate preparations have not yet been made related to export of mango as transportation for carrying labor to the mango orchards and essential arrangements for packing still have a big question mark, he added.

Since the mango crop is still not ready for harvesting and if the date of export of 20th May is followed, the exporters would ship immature and unsuitable mango. While, Pakistan had sustained huge financial losses last year due to export of unsuitable mango, he mentioned. Pakistani mango is very popular due to its delicious taste, specific aroma and eye-catching appearance and these inherent characteristics are only developed once the crop is fully matured.

Exporting immature mango, therefore would not meet expectations of the consumers and its credibility of the country would be badly affected and thus the exporters are likely to experience difficulties in getting fair price of mango in the International markets, Waheed said.

In a letter sent to the MoC, the association has sincerely requested for extension of date of export of mango to 1st June instead of 20th May so that mango with its inherent characteristics of delicious taste and mouth watering aroma can be exported.

The letter has further stated that under the current crises of Coronavirus Pandemic when the economy of country is under great stress, earning of much needed valuable foreign exchange through exports is vital to support the “hard pressed” economy and thus generation of foreign exchange by export of mango must be ensured.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/09/595577/exporters-urge-ministry-to-extend-deadline-of-mango-export/>

BILAWAL URGES CENTRE TO ACT IMMEDIATELY TO WARD OFF FRESH LOCUST ATTACK

By Our Correspondents Published: May 8, 2020

KARACHI/ISLAMABAD: Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari on Friday asked the federal government to immediately implement the National Action Plan (NAP) formulated to control the locust attack in the country.

Also, the National Command and Operations Center (NCOC) underlined the need for creating a dedicated forum to effectively combat the imminent threat of locust through strong inter-provincial coordination.

In a statement, the PPP chief pointed out that swarms of locust had entered Kashmore, Larkana, as well as Umerkot and Thar. He warned that locust had moved fertile breeding ground in the desert in India before heading back to Sindh and Punjab and even might spread to Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa.

“Any delay in the implementation of NAP decided at a meeting between the federal and Sindh government would mount grave danger to the agriculture as well as the overall economy,” said the PPP chairman.

The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) has already warned that locust attack can inflict losses to the tune of Rs600 billion to Pakistani economy if the government failed to take timely and full-fledged action.

Bilawal mentioned that a meeting between the federal and the Sindh governments had decided that under NAP at least 12 planes would be hired for aerial spray in the Balochistan – the entry point of locust swarms.

“But the federal government did not hire these planes. Only one aircraft and three helicopters are being operated in Balochistan, which cannot control the swarms,” he said. It was the responsibility of the Plant Protection Department of the federal government to carry out aerial spray while Sindh government had provided pesticides and vehicles, he added.

“Last year despite our pleas, provinces were left at the mercy of locusts. If the federal government failed to act this time it will be another disaster in the making,” he said, asking the federal government to “wake up from slumber” and implement NAP against locust attack without any delay.

The threat of locust attack was also discussed in the National Command and Operations Center (NCOC) meeting on Friday. The participants underlined the need for creating a dedicated forum to effectively combat the imminent threat of locust through strong inter-provincial coordination.

“There is a dire need to set up a forum like the NCOC, where all the key stakeholders can share information and resources to fight the locusts in an effective manner,” Planning Minister Asad Umar said, while chairing the meeting.

Food Security Minister Syed Fakhar Imam informed the NCOC that a meeting of all the key stakeholders was held at his ministry recently to evolve a comprehensive strategy against the locust issue. “All the resources are being mobilised to save agriculture from the locust swarms,” he said.

Umar underscored the importance of adopting the ‘TSE’ (tracking, spraying and elimination) policy against the locust. The provincial agriculture ministers, who also participated in the meeting through video link, said the locust should be contained in Balochistan to save other provinces from the menace.

Minister of State for Health Dr Zafar Mirza and Prime Minister’s Focal Person on Covid-19 Dr Faisal Sultan apprised the meeting about the overall situation of coronavirus pandemic. They also explained the reasons behind off-vent deaths of the infected patients in the country.

Dr Mirza said home quarantine of the coronavirus positive patients had been recommended in Punjab like other provinces. The meeting was also attended by NCOC National Coordinator Lt-Gen Hamooduz Zaman, Aviation Minister Ghulam Sarwar Khan and Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on National Security Moeed Yusuf.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2217152/1-bilawal-urges-centre-act-immediately-ward-off-fresh-locust-attack/>

FOOD AUTHORITIES SEIZE WHEAT IN RAIDS

By Z.Ali Published: May 9, 2020

HYDERABAD: As the Sindh government lags in attaining the wheat procurement target of 1.4 million tonnes, the authorities have launched a crackdown against traders and flour mills for allegedly stocking up on the crop. As a result, hundreds of thousands of wheat bags have been recovered from warehouses across the province.

In Ghotki’s Daharki taluka, the authorities recovered 365,000 bags of 100 kilogrammes each from several mills on Friday, according to the Daharki assistant commissioner, who led the raids. He claimed that the mills had illegally stocked up on the wheat.

“Early wheat purchase and stockpiling prevented the food department from meeting its target,” stated district food controller (DFC) Roshan Ali Panhwar, adding that once the district’s wheat procurement target was reached, surplus wheat bags would be returned to the private buyers.

Meanwhile, in Larkana, the government’s purchase of wheat had come to a near halt halfway through the procurement process before the raids for privately stocked wheat began on Thursday. Authorities recovered 90,000 bags from mills and warehouses in the raids, which deputy food director Abdul Ghaffar Shaikh valued at around Rs300 million.

Separately, in Kashmore-Kandhkot district, assistant commissioner Irshad Ahmed Khoso revealed that 16,000 bags had been recovered. According to DFC Ashraf Keerio, food department officials in the district had been given the task of procuring 900,000 wheat bags. “We have only achieved around 60 per cent of our procurement target and suddenly there is a shortage of wheat in the market.”

In the meantime, 200,000 bags were seized in Saleh Pat taluka of Sukkur district, while Dadu DFC Qareebullah Soomro stated that 56,500 bags had been recovered in Dadu and Mehar talukas. The authorities also seized 28,000 bags in Matiari and 8,000 bags in Mirpurkhas.

Meanwhile, the National Accountability Bureau in Sukkur has initiated four references in a multi-billion rupee wheat scam, nominating district food controllers among others. Wheat stock of around 168,000 tonnes had gone missing from the provincial government's warehouses in 14 districts over the last few years, according to NAB and the Sindh government.

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<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2217269/1-food-authorities-seize-wheat-raids/>

MANGO CROP DELAYED BY TWO WEEKS

By Kashif Hussain Published: May 9, 2020

KARACHI: Lockdowns and climate change have severely impacted the agriculture sector as the maturity of mango crops in Sindh and Punjab has been delayed by two weeks.

Owing to the absence of required temperature and humid climate, the mango season of 2020 is likely to be put off by a couple of weeks.

All Pakistan Fruit and Vegetable Exporters, Importers and Merchants Association (PFVA) Patron-in-Chief Waheed Ahmed said keeping these factors in view, his association had requested the Ministry of Commerce to extend the date for mango export by 12 days and set it at June 1, 2020.

In a statement on Friday, Ahmed expressed concern that climate change had started taking a heavy toll on Pakistan's agriculture by impacting major crops.

He highlighted that the Ministry of Commerce had fixed May 20 as the date for the beginning of mango export, however, if exports commenced at a time when the fruit was not ripe, it would badly hurt the credibility of Pakistan's exporters in international markets.

"The mango crop is still not ready to be harvested," remarked Ahmed. "If the original date of export (May 20) is followed, the exporters will ship unripe and unsuitable mangoes." He recalled that Pakistan sustained hefty losses last year due to the export of premature mangoes.

"Pakistani mangoes are liked globally due to their delicious taste, specific aroma and eye-catching appearance, and these inherent characteristics develop only when the crop is fully ripe," Ahmed elaborated.

Hence, the export of premature mangoes would not meet expectations of consumers and the credibility of the country would weaken, he said.

He voiced fear that the exporters were likely to experience difficulties in receiving fair prices of mango in the international market.

"The mango crop usually matures by mid-May, however, this year it is anticipated to be delayed by two weeks and export of unripe mango will not be in the best interest of the country," he said. "On the other hand, adequate preparations related to the transportation of labour to mango orchards for picking and packaging cannot be made due to lockdown."

In a letter addressed to the Ministry of Commerce, the PFVA requested an extension in the date of export to June 1 instead of May 20 so that ripe mangoes with inherent characteristics could be shipped abroad.

The letter stated that under the current Covid-19 crisis, earning of much-needed foreign exchange through exports was vital to support the hard-pressed economy. The association anticipated a favourable response from the ministry keeping in view the supreme interest of the country.

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<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2217329/2-mango-crop-delayed-two-weeks/>

MURAD APPROVES RS286M FOR ANTI-LOCUSTS OPERATION

The Newspaper's Staff Reporter Updated May 10, 2020

KARACHI: Chief Minister Syed Murad Ali Shah on Saturday approved Rs286 million, apart from de-freezing Rs132 million of agriculture department, to start pesticide spray for the elimination of locust swarms that have already damaged crops standing over 166,701 acres in the province.

He took the decision while presiding over a meeting on video link at CM House. Agriculture Minister Ismail Rahu, Chief Secretary Mumtaz Shah, Finance Secretary Hassan Naqvi, Agriculture Secretary Raheem Soomro, senior officers of the federal plant protection department and officers of the agriculture extension were also present.

Briefing the chief minister on the situation, Rahu said that locusts' swarms were first reported from Jacobabad on April 25. The other affected districts were Shikarpur, Larkana, Kandhkot-Kashmore, Ghotki, Sukkur, Khairpur, Matiari, Dadu, Jamshoro and Hyderabad in the interior of Sindh and Gadap and Malir in Karachi.

It was pointed out that nymphol population/hopper bands were still present in the desert areas of Tharparkar, Umerkot, Sanghar, Shaheed Benazirabad, Khairpur, Sukkur and Ghotki districts.

The chief minister said that the locusts could move to agricultural lands and thus posed a standing threat. He directed the agriculture department to continue its operation to control the swarms.

The plant protection department representatives told the chief minister that they assisted the Sindh government in the operation conducted in Ghotki, Kashmore and Khairpur where spray was done over 17,372 acres.

Rahu said that the agriculture extension teams also conducted spray in all these districts and covered an area of 24,867 acres. He put the overall coverage in all 18 districts at 41,500 acres.

The chief minister was informed that the survey and control operation in agricultural areas had been carried out by the agriculture department which had procured vehicles mounted with 45 sprayers.

The minister once again requested the chief minister to talk to the federal government for provision of six aircraft, ULV sprayers and pesticides in sufficient quantity and get field teams deployed.

Chief Secretary Mumtaz Shah told the chief minister that he had held a number of meetings on locust control. At present, he added, the agriculture department needed Rs286m for purchase of 25 sprayer-mounted vehicles, chemicals and pesticides.

The chief minister approved the release of Rs286m and directed the finance department to release Rs132m it had frozen under the coronavirus emergency measures.

The chief minister was told that partial damage occurred in pockets due to locust attack. Mostly the cultivated areas were saved due to regular spray.

The meeting was informed that the crops partially damaged included wheat standing over 35,751 (or 1.3pc) of the total crop, oil seeds 1,552 acres (or 2.5pc), pulses 111 acres (or 3.2 pc), fodder 3,656 acres (or 2.6pc), vegetables 4,247 acres (or 2.5pc) and other minor crops standing over an area of 76,067 acres.

The chief minister said it showed that overall 166,701 acres of the cultivated area was damaged which constituted 13.8pc of the total area.

Rahu told the chief minister that sugar cane, cotton and other crops, presently sown over an area of 1,751,130 hectares, could sustain heavy damage if timely spray was not conducted.

The chief minister directed the chief secretary to convene a joint meeting of agriculture department and federal plant protection department and evolve a strategy to start the pesticide spray operation and share with him the spray schedule.

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<https://www.dawn.com/news/1555825/murad-approves-rs286m-for-anti-locusts-operation>

MANGO HARVEST: FARMERS FACING SHORTAGE OF LABOUR

By RECORDER REPORT on May 10, 2020

Mango harvesting has been started at the farm level, but the farmers are facing shortage of labourers. In order to deal with this issue a meeting of the growers was held here recently under the chairmanship of focal person of District Hyderabad on the coronavirus, MPA Sharjeel Inaam Memon, to finalize the SOPs for skilled labourers for mango picking.

Sharjeel Memon told the meeting that although calling labourers from other provinces was difficult under present circumstances, yet they were trying to call a limited number of labourers so that not only growers could be saved from the economic losses but also to stop the spread of the coronavirus.

He suggested to the growers to employ local labourers in mango picking so that the poor labourers could be benefited.

According to the proposed SOPs for labourers for mango picking finalized in the meeting, the growers would provide a list of those labourers who would come from other provinces, and for that the assistant commissioner would establish a camp to register the labourers.

It is compulsory for labourers below 50 years of age coming from other provinces to bring with them health certificates. The farmers would be bound to inform the assistant commissioner if any laborer suffered from fever or flu.

The meeting was attended by DIG Hyderabad Naeem Ahmed Shaikh, Deputy Commissioner Hyderabad Fuad Gaffar Soomro, representatives of Abadgar Board Mehmood Nawaz Shah, Haji Nisar Memon and Murtaza Unar and farmers and other officers concerned.

Meanwhile, experts, academics, researchers and farmers highlighted the impact of Covid-19 on mango export. The researchers and academicians said that Pakistan is among the world's top producer of wheat, rice, cotton, sugarcane, mango and oranges.

Agriculture is the mainstay of Pakistan's economy, contributing 18.5 percent to the country's GDP and employing 38.5 percent of the labour force. Major crops (cotton, wheat, rice, maize and sugarcane) contribute 4 per cent and minor crops add 2 per cent to GDP while livestock sector adds 11 percent.

Prof. Dr. Muhammad Ismail Kumbhar, a development practitioner and researcher of Sindh, said that due to Covid-19 mangoes from Pakistan would not be exported due to the lockdown and closure of transportation.

Time is of the essence as mango crop in Sindh is ready from first week of May and by early June in Punjab. However the workers from southern Punjab are getting difficulties to pluck and pack the mangoes at various farms of Sindh.

The same applies to farmers associated with livestock, dairy and poultry. Muhammad Haroon Memon, a mango farmer from Kunri, said that every year, at least 10 tonnes of mangoes are exported weekly from his farm to the Gulf region. "The Gulf traders have asked us to wait until May 15," he said, urging the government to ensure food trade by air and sea during COVID-19.

Javed Soz, a development practitioner, said that Pakistan annually produces roughly 1.7 million tonnes of mangoes, exported to more than 50 countries, mainly to UAE and Saudi Arabia.

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<https://www.brecorder.com/2020/05/10/595745/mango-harvest-farmers-facing-shortage-of-labour/>

MILLERS WARN OF LOOMING FLOUR CRISIS

By Our Correspondent Published: May 10, 2020

QUETTA: The Pakistan Flour Mills Association (PFMA) has accused the provincial government of Balochistan of deliberately creating a wheat crisis in the province by imposing inter-district ban on the transportation of wheat in the name of coronavirus lockdown.

"The government should lift Section 144 for inter-district transport of wheat in Balochistan because this restriction is increasing flour prices across the province leading to a food shortage," said PFMA Balochistan chapter President Sayed Saleh Agha in a press conference on Friday.

He was flanked by the PFMA central committee member Syed Zahoor Agha.

The president requested the provincial government to permit mills to procure wheat.

Saleh warned that the flour mills across the province could be closed in protest against inappropriate policies of Balochistan government and the provincial food department.

The association members revealed that they have three days wheat stock for people of Balochistan. However, the government has not allowed them to procure wheat for mills.

"The provincial government allowed procurement of one million sacks of wheat in food policy for 2020-2021 but that will not fulfill the requirement and may trigger food shortage," he added.

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<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2217959/1-millers-warn-looming-flour-crisis/>

PAKISTAN'S SEAFOOD INDUSTRY DEMANDS ZERO-RATING

By Our Correspondent Published: May 10, 2020

KARACHI: The seafood industry has also set forward the demand for zero-rating coupled with a request of lower electricity tariff in a bid to regain its lost status. It has urged the government to allot priority to the sector similar to other export-oriented industries with regard to sales tax and income tax refunds.

These demands were made jointly by the Pakistan Fish Exporters Association (PFEA), Union of Small and Medium Enterprises (UNISAME) and Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority (Smeda) in a meeting on Saturday. The session was held to discuss recommendations to uplift the seafood sector of Pakistan to its true potential.

During the meeting, PFEA Chairman Zafar Kundi, along with seafood exporters Akhlaq Hussain and Yasir Abbas, urged the government to grant zero-rated status to seafood export industry just like the other export-oriented sectors enjoyed until past year.

They also emphasised the need for lower electricity tariff. Also present in the meeting, UNISAME President Zulfikar Thaver said it was high-time the fishing industry adopted modernisation.

“It needs finance and facilities to function at par with the international standards,” he said. “In fact, it needs to partner with China under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) for revival since this sector possesses a vast scope and sky is the limit.”

He stressed that the seafood sector could employ thousands of workers, creating opportunities for handsome income generation besides feeding nutritional food to the masses.

Above everything, this sector can earn valuable foreign exchange, however, it needs proper financing, facilitation and support of a strategic plan and policy.

Exporters insisted upon inclusion of correct HS codes in the negotiated FTA-II with China.

They further called for efforts at the highest levels to facilitate exporters facing hurdles in exporting to European Union and US. The participants also called for lifting the ban on seafood exports to countries like Saudi Arabia. They demanded allowance of minimum 5% rebate on merchandise exports under foreign trade policy of Pakistan.

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<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2217973/2-pakistans-seafood-industry-demands-zero-rating/>

SEAFOOD TRADERS DECRY INEFFECTIVENESS OF ECONOMIC RELIEF PACKAGE

Our Correspondent May 10, 2020

KARACHI: Lockdown-hit seafood traders have raised doubt over the effectiveness of the central bank's economic relief package while they are reeling under sales trough – calling for the sector-specific support programs, zero-rated tax facility and rebates on exports.

Industry officials said seafood industry has remained closed since February due to COVID-19 lockdown, whereas salaries continued to be paid. The situation might last till September. There is also a constitutional ban on fishing in June and July.

Pakistan Fisheries Exporters Association (PFEA) said the refinancing scheme of the State Bank of Pakistan to give concessional loans for salaries and wages is not helpful as it shares only half of payrolls. The relief doesn't work as the industry would be without earnings for five months.

PFEA officials were talking via a video link with the Union of Small and Medium Enterprises and seafood exporters, including Akhlaq Hussain, Yasir Abbas Syed and Zafar Kundi.

Seafood processing plants need to be provided with loans on soft terms and subsidies to do balancing, modernisation and replacement and upgradation for value addition, they said.

The officials demanded zero-rated tax facility for seafood export industry, just like proposed for other five industries on sales tax and income tax refunds. They also emphasised the need for lower electricity tariffs. The officials also stressed inclusion of correct HS codes in the second free trade agreement with China. They called for efforts at the highest levels to remove the hurdles in exporting seafood to the European Union and USA. Seafood exports continued to fall in April. They amounted to \$39 million during the last month, down around 16 percent year-on-year. The government imposed lockdown in late March to prevent local transmission of the novel coronavirus infection. In July-March, seafood exports, however, rose around eight percent to \$317 million.

Efforts are required to get the ban on exports to countries, like Saudi Arabia, removed. They demanded allowance of minimum 5 percent rebate on merchandise exports under foreign trade policy of Pakistan. They said regional countries give about 15 percent rebate on merchandise exports. They also demanded resumption of freight subsidy allowance for frozen and fresh seafood exports just like live seafood.

Zulfikar Thaver, president of Union of Small and Medium Enterprises said the fishing sector needs to be modernised. It needs finance and facilities to meet the international standards. "In fact it needs to partner with China under China-Pakistan Economic Corridor for revival as there is vast scope and sky is the limit," Thaver said. "This sector can employ, give opportunities for handsome income generation and feed the masses with one of the best nutritional value food. We are knocking at the doors of Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority for advocacy of our cause with the government not to overlook our needs anymore and revive this promising sector on fast track."

Mukesh Kumar, provincial chief Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority emphasised the need of uplifting a promising sector with vast potential. He endorsed the suggestions and promised to take up matter to revive the aquaculture. He agreed to submit a complete proposal based on facts and figures to be prepared jointly with the stakeholders.

<https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/656474-seafood-traders-decry-ineffectiveness-of-economic-relief-package>