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ISLAMABAD ♦ The severe gas crisis won't stop the federal government from issuing around 240,000 new gas connections in the next few weeks and months as the exercise at the cost of public money might please new and old voters, it has been reliably learnt.

The sources aware of the matter confided to The Nation that the federal government has pressurised the regulatory authorities to give a nod to the Sui Northern Gas Pipelines Limited (SNGPL) to collect Rs 7 billion from all gas consumers under the head of new gas connection schemes. Officials believe it amounts to violation of the licence rules by both Sui Northern Gas Pipelines Limited (SNGPL) and Sui Southern Gas Pipelines Limited (SSGPL) to meet the government agenda. And will be an additional burden on the already over-pressed masses as well as the fragile economy of the country.

On the one hand the federal government is most often found harping on the sad note of serious gas crisis in the country, but on the other, it seems desperate to take political advantage, no matter what the cost might be for the economy. ♦ Grant of 3,000-km-long new gas schemes and issuance of 400,000 gas meters in favourite constituencies is a matter of grave public concern because it will add to miseries and put additional burden on the present gas consumers amid the severe gas shortage, an official of the Petroleum Ministry said on condition of anonymity. ♦ The new gas schemes will further reduce gas supply to some important sectors and also slow down economic development, ♦ the official added.

The documents available with The Nation disclosed that Oil and Gas Regulatory Authority (Ogra), while meeting the demands of Prime Minister Raja Pervaiz Ashraf and Adviser to Premier on Petroleum and Natural Resources Dr Asim Hussain, has given its approval to SNGPL to initiate new gas connections and gas schemes in its jurisdiction. Following Ogra's approval, SNGPL will provide 240,000 new gas meters during the financial year 2012-13. As a result, the gas consumers of the country will have to bear the burden of over Rs 2.08 billion. Ogra has already approved 160,000 new gas meters. In this way, the country's gas consumers will have to pay total Rs 3.62 billion for the new gas meters. Earlier, Ogra, entrusted with the mandate to protect the rights of gas consumers, had rejected the request of SNGPL and declined to give its approval for the installation of the new meters and initiation of the new gas schemes. The federal government has now issued policy guidelines to Ogra ahead of the general elections. The sources told this scribe that the PPP-led federal government, in a bid to gain the sympathies of voters and strengthen the position of favourite candidates in the upcoming general elections, has managed to get Ogra's approval, absolutely setting aside the relevant laws.

They said SNGPL and SSGCL will receive more than Rs 5 billion from the existing gas consumers for the new gas connection schemes. The documents reveal SNGPL and SSGCL have committed violation of clause 34 of their respective licences because prior to fulfilling the demands of the existing gas consumers, issuance of new gas connections and gas schemes by the gas companies is a violation under the Ogra Ordinance. The common man, to some extent unaware of the consequences, will be happy over the new gas connection schemes amid the serious gas crisis, but, in fact, the government's initiative will slow the economic development of the country and also be a source of additional burden on gas consumers already bearing the brunt of high gas prices, low gas pressure, long queues at CNG stations, coupled with sky-rocketing prices of essential commodities.

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Courtesy: The Nation