

RAWALPINDI : With the public transport on strike, alternatives such as taxis and rickshaws have also increased their charges adding to the miseries of commuters in the twin cities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad.

The twin cities transporters are on strike for the past four days after the Islamabad High Court (IHC) prevented vehicles that had installed more than one CNG cylinder or petrol gallons under the passengers' seats from plying their routes.

Transporters claimed they were striking against the directives of the Oil and Gas Regulatory Authority (Ogra) for not allowing them to install multiple cylinders in public vehicles. They said the authority had not given them time to verify the safety of the cylinders from approved workshops.

They announced to continue the strike on Monday so that the government met their demands.

However, Regional Transport Authority (RTA) officials said the IHC had directed the local administration to bar these vehicles, but the transporters refused to remove additional cylinders.

The strike has created problems for the general public as people were seen on bus stops searching for alternate means of transportation between Rawalpindi and Islamabad.

Due to the strike, taxicabs and rickshaws have increased their fares, leaving people no option but to pay. Some cab drivers even refused to take passengers to distant places as they made more money for short distances.

Complaining about the high-handedness of taxi drivers, a commuter, Mohammad Irfan, said the distance between his residence (near Zero Point) and his office (at Shamsabad) was hardly a few kilometers, but cabs charged between Rs300 and Rs400.

People who regularly travel by taxi from Rawalpindi said the fares for Islamabad had considerably risen. "I used to pay Rs200 for traveling from Westridge to Zero Point, but on Sunday, the fare stood at Rs500," said Imran Ahmed.

Similarly, Bilal Safdar from Peshawar Road said, "I had to go to my grandparents' house on Adiala Road, which is quite far from my place. Cabdrivers refused to take me there due to the high temperature and more passengers for the short distance."

Some passengers urged the government to introduce government transport service in the city to break the monopoly of the public transporters in the twin cities.

"If the government and private sector run their separate transport, people would get better service," said Mohammad Zakir, a resident of Raja Bazaar. He added that the government had turned a blind eye to public safety and the rowdiness of transporters.

Meanwhile, Twin Cities Transporters Association President Malik Sultan Awan, while talking to Dawn, said, "Our strike against Ogra will continue on Monday, and other cities of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa will also join hands with us."

He said the government had ignored the problems of transporters, who were already facing problems in earning their livelihood due to the CNG loadshedding.

The Ogra added to our problems by issuing confusing directives; on hand it asked us to install a cylinder beneath the back seat while on the other, it prevented

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installation in the passenger compound, he said.

We are not striking against the IHC's decision. Rather we are against Ogra for not providing transporters enough time to get a certificate of cylinder safety. There are 30 approved workshops in the twin cities and a total of 25,000 vehicles plying different routes, Mr Awan said.

When contacted, RTA Secretary Awais Manzoor Tarar said the transporters were striking against the decision of IHC and there was no issue between the RTA and the transporters. They (transporters) are very cooperative with us (RTA) and we too cooperate with them, he said.

He said the RTA had managed to convince the transporters to end the strike and if they failed to do so, the authority would bring some buses on different routes on Monday.

We will check different areas on Monday and send buses to provide alternate service for the people, but will not allow transporters who had forced others to take their vehicles off the road, he said.

Courtesy: Dawn