

Gas Shortages Leave Uzbeks in the Cold

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Uzbekistan is increasing its fuel exports at a time when many of its people are freezing in their homes.

Hundreds of thousands of Uzbek householders are going without gas for the sixth winter running because the authorities have apparently failed to keep up with domestic demand.

Residents of the Andijan, Samarkand and Jizak regions and the autonomous republic of Karakalpakstan have been left without gas in temperatures of minus 20 degrees centigrade - and many are now starting to stage protests.

Earlier this month, some 100 women stopped traffic on a central street in the Fergana valley town of Andijan, demanding a resumption of the supply to their homes. "We are freezing, and no one is willing to help us," said protester Rozia Abdullaeva.

Men stayed away from the rally, after police allegedly warned those attending a previous demonstration in December that they would be arrested for religious extremism - a highly serious charge.

Andijan boasts around 2,000 gas-heated greenhouses used to grow produce for small businesses, and analysts believe these - and heavy consumption by factories and other industries - are exacerbating the problem.

"We never had so many private greenhouses in Soviet times," pensioner Alfia Gafurova told IWPR. "There was rigorous discipline in the gas industry and other businesses as well.

"Those who have money can always secure a gas supply by bribing the officials - so there's no surprise that there's nothing left for us ordinary folk."

Government officials in Tashkent claim that the former Soviet republic has more natural gas than it needs, and blame any shortages in the supply on wastage and poor insulation.

According to statistics supplied by the national oil and gas company Uzbekneftegaz, Uzbekistan is the eighth largest natural gas producer in the world, putting out 57 billion cubic metres in 2002 alone.

While fuel is exported to southern parts of Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Russia and Ukraine, official figures put this figure at just over 10 per cent of output - leaving the lion's share for the Uzbek people.

But some analysts believe that Uzbekistan is currently stepping up its gas exports to increase revenue - and domestic customers are paying the price.

Speculation that Tashkent is exporting far more gas than it is admitting was confirmed by an official from the Ellikalinsk district, who wished to remain anonymous. "Not only the very top officials are aware of this - it's well known at the middle levels of administration as well," he said.

A recent deal with Russian energy giant Gazprom seems to partially corroborate this theory. Russia is slated to receive around 10 billion cubic metres of gas by 2005 - around 18 per cent of the current Uzbek output - decreasing the domestic supply accordingly.

According to Sobirjon Solimov, a representative of the national gas supplier, exports have increased because the republic can no longer rely on its main money-earner, cotton. But he denied that domestic supplies have dropped, insisting that fuel is being squandered.

"Tashkent cannot keep an eye on every gas pipeline in every region - that's the job of the local authorities, but they don't want to have to deal with this, as it requires a lot of work.

"There have to be strict controls on how people and companies use gas, because at the moment it is being overused and wasted."

In the meantime, householders have been forced to install wood burners in their homes, chopping down trees or even cutting up items of furniture for fuel.

Freezing temperatures during December forced hundreds of residents in the Karakalpak capital Nukus to build fires and cook their food outdoors.

Government officials insist Karakalpakstan receives more than two billion cubic meters of gas annually. "But we lose nearly half of it thanks to our residents, through poor insulation or on old-fashioned equipment," explained Damir Kalimbetov, chief engineer of the autonomous republic's gas distributor Karakalpakgaztaminat.

Karakalpakstan's regional and municipal authorities have set up agencies to monitor gas consumption, but analysts question whether there's really the political will to address the problem.

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