

## **Uzbekistan Sees Rare Protests Over Gas Shortage**

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Unusually harsh winter conditions have frozen up the gas supply to homes, schools and offices. A fall in gas pressure caused by exceptionally cold weather in Uzbekistan has brought protesters out into the streets in various parts of the country to complain about the lack of heating in their homes.

On January 16, a group of between 250 and 300 people gathered in front of the mayor's office in the city of Fergana in southeastern Uzbekistan to demand that local government ensure an uninterrupted supply of gas and electricity.

Two days later, dozens of residents of Khojeyli, far away in the northwest region of Karakalpakstan, protested about the lack of gas in their homes by blocking the main highway that runs from the provincial capital Nukus to the town of Kungrad.

Also on January 18, a road was blocked by demonstrators in the Zafarabad district of Jizak region in central Uzbekistan. They said they would carry on until the local authorities resumed supplies of electricity and heating to their homes.

Another protest was staged by apartment block residents in a district near the western city of Bukhara. "Because of the frosts, the boiler for Microdistrict Five cracked, and several multi-storey blocks were left without heating," said a local housewife through tears. "I have a small baby, and he was freezing and cried the whole night because of the cold."

These scattered expressions of public anger are a rarity in Uzbekistan, where there is no political opposition and the authorities clamp down hard on even the slightest sign of dissent.

Uzbekistan is more than self-sufficient in natural gas, with official statistics showing that it exports 12 billion of the 62 billion cubic metres it produces annually, and keeps the rest for domestic consumption.

However, distribution has been badly disrupted by bitter frosts that began in late December, which have left pipelines frozen up and gas pressure plummeting.

Average daytime temperatures across Uzbekistan are currently 15 or 20 degrees below zero, and at night it can get as cold as minus 30. This is exceptional for this southern Central Asian country, where one would normally expect a monthly average of between three and ten degrees above freezing even in winter.

The state weather service has said such prolonged and bitter frosts occur only once in a decade, and forecast that the weather will remain the same until the end of January. Even after that, it is unlikely to get significantly warmer.

Since the beginning of January, the gas supply in many places has become irregular, and people have started using kerosene stoves and electric heaters. The latter have contributed to overloads on the national grid, so that the authorities have had to institute power cuts.

In the region around the Uzbek capital Tashkent, kindergartens and schools closed because the lack of gas stopped their central heating systems, which then froze up.

In Zafarabad, one of the areas where protesters blocked a road, many residents turned back to a traditional Central Asian form of heating.

“There isn’t enough gas, only just sufficient to boil water for tea,” said one father of eight, as he explained how his family sat around a table placed over a hole in the floor containing hot coals and embers, all of them covered in a large blanket to keep the heat in. “We all sit in the one room and warm ourselves.”

He added, “We’re having to buy firewood, which has gone up in price a lot – a cart-load costs 10,000 som [eight US dollars], which is very expensive for us.”

In the Djondor district, 15 kilometres from Bukhara, just about every second family has a greenhouse to grow vegetables over the winter and earn some money.

As one young woman explained, the gas heating they normally use to keep the greenhouses at a stable temperature went off this year.

“All vegetables died because of the cold, and who will compensate us now?” she said. “We always grow cucumbers, tomatoes and cabbage both for ourselves and for sale, and that’s how we make our living.”

Added to these problems is the limited supply of electricity. For the past three weeks, there have been power cuts, conducted on a cyclical basis so that homes and offices get about two or three hours of power a day.

“Today even wedding parties are held in the daytime, rather than at night when the electricity might be cut off,” said the mother of a recent bride in the northwestern Khorezm region. “Apart from the wedding plov [pilaf], which is cooked in a cauldron over a fire, we weren’t able to prepare the other festive dishes in an electric oven because they’d need a lot of electric power.”

“In early January, people started going to the local government to complain about the cold and the shortage of gas,” said a local activist also in Khorezm. “However, after their efforts to get heating proved futile, the protestors lost heart.”

Local government’s response to the protests has differed from place to place.

In Karakalpakstan, local officials met protesters and explained the reasons for the drop in pressure, promising to do their best to rectify the situation. After the protestors dispersed, the gas supply did improve for a short while, but the pressure then fell off again.

In neighbouring Khorezm, the local government head of Hazarasp district responded to a complaint delivered by one woman by ordering the gas supply to be switched off altogether to all the houses in her street.

The government doubled the supply of coal and fuel oil to the power plants that supply piped heating water to their local areas, but an industry insider said even this added amount was not enough, and in any case much of the fuel was brown coal, which is less efficient than black.

An engineer who has worked in a carbon fuel-fired power station for years said that in earlier years, the gas would not have frozen in the pipes.

“In Soviet times, when there was a frosts the gas was diluted with a special admixtures so that it would not freeze, so the pressure in the pipes remained at normal levels and survived low atmospheric temperatures,” he explained. “These days they don’t include that admixture in the gas.”

Another power station employee said the drop in pressure was at least partly attributable to leaks in Uzbekistan’s worn-out gas pipeline network.

“Unless the system is refurbished, we will freeze again in the future,” he warned.

This winter, many elderly Uzbeks in rural areas have resorted to Russian-style warm winter clothing – traditional felt boots and sheepskin coats.

“I’ve had these clothes since Soviet times,” said one pensioner, wearing a Russian fur hat with earflaps. “There were frosts like this in Uzbekistan back in 1968, when the roofs of houses collapsed under the weight of the snow. I had the sheepskin coat and felt boots on then.”

(Names of interviewees have been withheld because of concerns for their safety.)

**Location:** Central Asia  
Uzbekistan  
Turkmenistan  
Tajikistan

**Focus:** Central Asia

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**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/uzbekistan-sees-rare-protests-over-gas>