

Long queues for fuel as petrol pumps run out of stocks

Serpentine queues were seen outside petrol pumps across the country as alarmed vehicle owners tried to stock up on fuel as petrol vends started to run dry Thursday on the second day of a nationwide strike by employees of public sector oil companies.

Many leaders of the agitating workers went underground fearing arrests under the Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA), which many state governments invoked to tackle the employees' strike which the Delhi High Court has ruled illegal.

The oil sector officers' association, an umbrella organisation of 45,000 employees in the public oil sector companies, called for an indefinite strike from Wednesday to force the government to give them wage hikes.

But consumers have already started feeling the impact. A large number of petrol vends ran out of stocks after they did not get replenishments of petroleum products.

At a petrol vend on the Delhi-Gurgaon highway, employees had to turn away trucks and other vehicles as there were no stocks left of petrol and diesel. 'We have gone dry since 4 p.m. yesterday (Wednesday),' said the manager of the Rajasthan Highway Service Station, Sunil Yadav.

Traffic jams were witnessed at several places in the national capital Thursday evening as people queued up with their vehicles at retail petrol vends fearing they would not get fuel on Friday.

At an outlet in north Delhi, manager Mahavir Jain feared that his stocks would be exhausted by evening due to the high demand. 'All the three pumps nearby have gone dry and we have a demand which is three to four times the normal. I am afraid that our stocks will end by evening, but the next supply is doubtful,' he said.

His words found an echo from petrol dealers in cities and towns across the country.

'Since morning there is a rush at our petrol pump. If the strike continues, we might run short of supply by Friday,' said Ajit Kumar, manager of Priyadarshini Service Station, affiliated to IOC, on Bangalore's Hosur Road.

In Lucknow, long queues were seen at petrol pumps. 'In the ongoing strike, the best option is to store petrol as no one knows how long the strike would continue,' Ranjeet Bhalla, a government employee who was in the queue at an outlet in Lucknow's Dandaiya locality, told IANS.

In Tamil Nadu, long queues of agitated consumers arguing with harried employees of select fuel outlets were reported.

In Tripura, most of the depots of IOC have stopped supplying fuel to retail vends in many cities, including the capital Agartala. However, the Left Front-led state government said it would not invoke the ESMA to break the agitation.

Vehicle owners have had to rely on outlets of Hindustan Petroleum Corp (HPCL), whose officers have not joined the strike.

'I thought that due to a holiday, we will have low sales, as we do on Sundays. But, the demand has almost doubled. People must have heard that our pump is not running dry,' said Satish Kumar, manager at a petrol pump in Bhikaji Cama Place, Delhi.

HPCL outlets in [Bangalore](#) were crowded since Thursday morning. 'There is no dearth of supply, but demand for both petrol and diesel is soaring due to the strike,' said Mohammad Sharif, an official of a HP petrol vend in Vijanagar.

The impact on the aviation sector has been minimal, as most of the senior managers have been put on the duty there.

But, the western region is the worst-affected, with gas-run power plants shutting down. Over a dozen fertilizer plants have already closed down, which will impact the agriculture sector.

On Thursday, Indian Oil chairman Sarthak Behuria indicated that stocks at retail outlets will run out in a day. But, petrol pump owners said the outlets had started to go dry right from Wednesday evening.

Petroleum Secretary R.S. Pandey said crude oil production was at 80 percent of normal, while refineries were 70 percent operational.

A meeting was held Thursday morning between the senior managers of the oil companies and OSOA members, but did not yield any breakthrough.

The government remained firm on its position that the officers should place faith in the committee, chaired by Home Minister P. Chidambaram, which has been tasked to examine the employees' demand for salary hike.

But the association leaders said the government has not fulfilled the previous commitments it made on the issue. They were also peeved at the arrest and suspension orders issued to their members by the employing oil companies.

The country's largest oil producer, Oil and Natural Gas Corp (ONGC), has terminated the services of 60 officers, while Indian Oil Corp and other companies were also contemplating action against 'instigators'.

The petroleum ministry admitted that the capital's outlets have been running out, but added that 300 petrol pumps were 'fully operational'.

The Delhi High Court has restrained the strike call, and state governments like Delhi, Assam and Orissa have invoked the Essential Services Maintenance Act. Delhi Police Wednesday arrested two OSOA leaders, while the companies have suspended several strikers.

Private retail outlet operator Essar Oil Thursday saw its daily sales jump in its daily sales after the ongoing oil sector strike hit supplies to petrol pumps around the country.

The petroleum ministry has asked the country's two private refiners, Essar and Reliance Industries, to meet any shortfall that state-owned oil companies may face.

Besides Essar, Shell India operates about 50 outlets. Reliance Industries, which operates the world's largest refinery at Jamnagar, is yet to reopen its retail outlets.

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