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Non-payment of pay for three months: Workers' protest keeps metro bus service suspended for hours

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Metro bus staff hold a protest at Kalma Chowk against non-payment of salaries. — White Star

LAHORE: The metro bus operation in Lahore remained suspended for about six hours on Saturday due to a protest by the workers against non-payment of salaries for three months.

There are reports that the employees of the metro bus in Rawalpindi also suspended the bus operation there in protest against nonpayment of pay.

The protesting employees started gathering at Gajjumatta, Shahdara, Bhati Chowk and some other stations and stopped the metro bus forcibly on the track at about 8am. They asked the passengers to leave the buses and opt for other means of transport to reach their destinations. They warned the drivers to avoid driving the buses and park them at Shahdara and Gajjumata depots.

“The protest put many passengers, including the elderly, in trouble as they were forced to use other public transport,” said an official who wanted to remain anonymous.

“Keeping in view the situation, the authorities called police who took some of the protesters into custody. This flared up the protesters who held a sit-in on the bus track, stopping the operation till 2pm,” he added.

A long delay in the release of the quarterly amount of subsidy to the Punjab Mass Transit Authority (PMTA) by the provincial government has been cited as the main reason for non-payment of salaries to the employees for the last three months, *Dawn* has learnt.

“No one bothered about our repeated requests for payment of salaries and we were left with no option but to launch a protest that caused the suspension of the metro bus operations in Lahore,” an employee of a private company responsible for running the automated ticketing system under an agreement with the PMTA said.

“The protests were also organised in Rawalpindi on the issue. If there is no payment in the coming days, there would be no bus operation,” he warned.

The Punjab government is responsible of paying Rs12.5bn annual subsidy for the metro bus in Lahore, Rawalpindi and Multan. The PMTA, a subsidiary of the government's transport department, receives subsidy in four quarterly installments and makes payments to the companies to whom it had outsourced the services related to ticketing, cleanliness, bus operations, security, repair/maintenance etc. However, for a couple of years, especially during the last six months, the release of quarterly subsidy to the PMTA and subsequently to the companies has been facing delays due to some unexplained administrative and functional issues allegedly on the part of the government.

According to another official source, the government didn't release the quarterly installment to the authority despite reminders.

“Though the release of subsidy had faced delays, especially in the last couple of years, the delay for three months happened for the first time. It led to nonpayment of subsidy to the companies,” the source said.

He added that the company, responsible for operating ticketing system, also requested the PMTA for payments a couple of times but to no avail. He said the payment to other companies, excluding the one operating the metro buses, is also facing massive delays.

“If there is no payment, everyone, excluding the drivers, would be on strike,” he warned.

A senior PMTA official said the government would soon release subsidy.

“The company dealing with the ticketing would soon be paid and the issue would be resolved within a week or so,” PMTA General Manager (Operations) Syed Uzair Shah told Dawn. He said there were also precedents that the payment of subsidies faced delays during the previous government’s tenure.

“Sometime, it happens due to some procedures. But everything will be settled by the next week,” he said and added that the bus operation remained suspended till 1:15pm due to protests.

“In Rawalpindi too, on Nov 27, the bus operation was disrupted by the employees. However, there was no issue in Multan,” he explained.

Though during the initial years of the metro bus operation (2013/14) the metro bus drivers had also organised some protests due to low pay and poor service structure, there was no issue of delays in non-payment of subsidy or funds to the then Punjab Metro Bus Authority.

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