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## Afghans protest Iran fuel truck ban

7/2011

Hundreds of Afghans demonstrated outside the Iranian Embassy in Kabul Friday to protest Iran's blocking of thousands of fuel trucks at the border with Afghanistan, a step that has sent domestic fuel prices soaring as the country's harsh winter sets in.

The unofficial ban on fuel trucks crossing the Iran-Afghanistan border began about two weeks ago, with about 2,500 trucks stuck at the crossing. The move, which Afghan officials have criticized as being tantamount to an embargo, has led wholesale domestic fuel prices to rise as much as 70 percent.

Carrying banners and chanting "down with Iran," about 300 to 400 people marched through the streets of Kabul to demonstrate outside the Iranian embassy.

"It has been two weeks that the government of Iran has been blocking the fuel tankers to Afghanistan, and this comes at a time the Afghan people are going through winter," said Najibullah Kabuli, a former member of parliament.

He called the ban "sanctions against the widows and orphans of the Afghan people."

Earlier this week, Iran acknowledged a link between the ban and Tehran's recent decision to slash domestic fuel subsidies to cut costs and boost an economy squeezed by international sanctions.

Afghan officials say Iran has also told them it is concerned the shipments are destined for NATO forces operating in Afghanistan. But NATO and Afghan officials deny that, insisting the fuel is destined for civilian consumer use.

Afghanistan, which has no refineries of its own and is mired in an almost decade-long war against the Taliban and other militants, relies entirely on imported fuel. Iran supplies about 30 percent of the country's refined fuel, and the remainder of the blocked shipments are from Iraq and Turkmenistan and are only moving through Iran, Afghan officials say.

Senior Afghan officials recently traveled to Tehran to discuss the issue. Farid Shirzai, head of the Afghan Commerce Ministry's fuel department, said on Tuesday that Iran had begun allowing 40 trucks per day through its borders with three western Afghan provinces, up from about four trucks per day in the preceding two weeks.