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Afghan businessmen protest Iran's fuel blockade

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KABUL – Afghan businessmen vowed Tuesday to stop doing business with neighboring Iran until it stops blocking thousands of fuel trucks from crossing into Afghanistan — a blockade that has caused fuel prices to spike.

The Iranians began barring fuel trucks from crossing the Iran-Afghanistan border in late December, leaving about 2,500 trucks stuck at three crossings. 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.

The blockade, now in its fourth week, has prompted protests in Kabul and in Herat province, which borders Iran. The complaints commission of the upper house of the Afghan parliament on Monday strongly condemned Iranian interference in Afghanistan. An Afghan political party has collected more than 200,000 signatures and fingerprints of angry Kabul residents on a petition protesting the fuel truck blockade.

Iran supplies about 30 percent of the country's refined fuel, Afghan officials say. The remainder of the blocked shipments of vehicle and heating fuel comes from Iraq and Turkmenistan and is only transiting Iran, they say.

Tehran has said the ban was linked to its recent decision to slash domestic fuel subsidies in a bid 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, though Afghan and NATO officials deny that.

"This fuel doesn't belong to NATO, it belongs to the poor Afghan people," Farid Shirzai, head of the Afghan Commerce Ministry's fuel department, said Tuesday.

He said Iran allowed about 40 tanker trucks to cross the border at three crossings on Monday.

Najibullah Kabuli, a former member of the Afghan parliament from Kabul and leader of the National Participation Party, said he submitted the 300 meter- (yard-) long petition from Kabul residents upset about Iranian interference in Afghanistan to the U.N. office in Kabul on Monday.

"The Afghan government is quiet and has shown no reaction" to the blockade, he said. "The National Participation Party has taken this step to show a strong reaction and is requesting the support of the international community."

"Iran is stopping all the fuel tankers at their border and not letting those tankers come into Afghanistan," Kabuli said. "This is hurting Afghan businessmen, costing them millions of dollars."

About 60 businessmen who are members of the Afghan Chamber of Commerce gathered Tuesday to issue a resolution pledging to stop doing business with Iran. They also said they would not attend an upcoming economic conference being held in Tehran.

"From today, we are not going to do any business with Iran because we are not sure if Iran has confiscated the fuel or what's happening," said Khan Jan Alokozai, deputy of the chamber. "The Afghan businessmen are not happy with this act by Iran."

Commerce Minister Anwarul Haq Ahady, who traveled to Moscow this week, is working to increase fuel imports from other countries such as Russia, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Some Afghan businesses already have struck deals with Russian companies and the Afghan government hopes that more are coming.

The minister says very little progress had been made in attempts to negotiate passage for the tankers stuck at the border. Between 1,400 and 1,500 of the original 2,500 stranded tankers are still waiting to cross into Afghanistan.

The government's efforts appear to be having some effect as fuel prices, which rose from about \$900 a ton to about \$1,500 after the blockade began, have now dropped to about \$1,350 a ton.

On Sunday, hundreds of Afghans protested against Iran for blocking the fuel shipments in Herat, the capital of Herat province in western Afghanistan. Protesters also have recently thrown eggs at the Iranian Embassy in the Afghan capital.