

Power outages cripple Zimbabwe

Many areas of Harare, the capital, were without power for most of last week and early this week. The past months have been marked by almost daily outages, but this – it lasted five days – was the worst yet.

The state electricity company, the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority (ZESA), blamed technical faults for the massive outage, the worst in months marked by a series of power shortages. To add to their woes, a power surge after a scheduled outage on Monday last week blew a main high-voltage supply cable, ZESA said.

Officials also said the theft of cables and oil from transformer units had left engineers – already facing chronic shortages of hard currency for spare parts, equipment and fuel – battling with mounting breakdowns.

The situation is further exacerbated by the fact that Mozambique, which supplies Zimbabwe with some power, said earlier this month that as a result of a dispute over an unpaid debt of US\$35 million, they were reducing their supply to Zimbabwe, which imports nearly 40% of its power from regional neighbours.

Bare shelves, no power, early closing

The five-day outage was the worst in memory in Harare, householders said. Usually, outages last between four and 17 hours and have forced many homes and businesses to install petrol-powered generators, and inverters. The latter are rechargeable battery packs that are charged while the power is on and then can be used during outages to power lights and low-voltage appliances – that means kettles, refrigerators or stoves are not able to be powered by the inverters.

Several stores with shelves bare of even the maize-meal staple and most basic goods shut down early through the week to save generator fuel. Clinics and hospitals, which are usually spared power cuts, ran standby generators over the weekend, but at least one had to move patients out when its generator broke down as a result of constant use over days.

A nearby blood bank cut back its operations and shifted blood stocks to facilities in unaffected districts. Householders with scarce meat and other perishables called friends across the city to use fridge and freezer space.

Burning the midnight oil – when there is any

One suburban cafe told customers Saturday to return later when the generator had been "given a rest" and refuelled. The suburb resounded with the sound of generators placed on the sidewalk outside businesses, resembling the aftermath of a war zone or disaster area.

In recent months, mothers and housewives in well-to-do suburbs have become accustomed to doing laundry, ironing and

cooking and filling hot water flasks between midnight and dawn when regular outages are less likely.

In a situation reminiscent of Germany back in 1929, when the German mark slumped to a million or more to the US dollar, a single US dollar now buys one million Zimbabwe dollars for the first time on the rampant black market that is fuelled by acute shortages across the crumbling economy. Dealers reported the central bank buying at unofficial rates to help pay for fuel and power imports.

Official annual inflation soared to 7,982%, the highest in the world, the state central statistical office said in an announcement Thursday. Independent estimates put real inflation closer to 25,000% and the International Monetary Fund has forecast it will reach 100,000% by the end of the year.

Price cuts backfire – as predicted

Power, water and telephone outages have worsened sharply since the government ordered price cuts of around half on all goods and services in June to fight inflation. Many of those cuts, however, have since been revoked. At the time, several experts warned that the price cuts would backfire, and they did. Companies were unable to continue selling products at less than it was costing them to acquire or produce. In addition, while locals were able to stock up on products at rock-bottom prices, they have since been left with empty stomachs.

Zimbabweans have a new greeting that is heard increasingly often in Zimbabwe. When one greets another with "Two out of three," that means he or she has water and a working phone, but no power. A response of "One out of three" means the respondent is even less fortunate – they only have water... no power, and no working telephone.

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