

Generator sales soar on worries of major blackouts

By [Dumisani Ndlela](#)

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Two countrywide blackouts this week sent Zimbabwean businesses scurrying for back-up power supplies on worries of major power supply interruptions this year from the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority (ZESA), the country's power utility. Generator retailers reported soaring generator sales.

No figures were available, but one retailer indicated that his order book was now too big to ensure quick supplies. Most of the generators are imported, and dealers have to raise the foreign currency from the parallel market to import stock for customers.

However, customers with foreign currency accounts simply pay in foreign currency for the supplies, although they have to seek approval first from regulatory authorities before making out the payments.

There was a marked increase in advertisements for generators in the country's newspapers because of the intensifying power supply crisis.

One advertiser promised "Power to the nation", with "customised import solutions" for all industry players, from farming, mining to the manufacturing sector.

With the battle for customers almost raging, one dealer bought a full-page in the broadsheet daily newspaper, with an advert that screamed, "No Power?"

Here is the answer: The use of these products will cause increased productivity, reduced downtime (and) improved service".

One company known for selling bond paper and cell phone and computer products emerged with an announcement that it was now an official distributor of top of the range imported generator brands in Zimbabwe.

Apparently, the established distributors are now marketing their products based on back up service, but the emerging players are promising products that make less noise and have the lowest prices.

Generators can crank 90 to 95 decibels of sound, and the sound could echo off walls.

This is likely to be a nuisance Zimbabweans will have to contend with for as long as normal supplies are not assured from the national power utility.

Generators rumbled on most business premises on Monday, after the nation-wide blackout that had plunged the country Saturday evening recurred, disrupting all normal economic activities in the country.

Banks had to run the engines to dispense cash to desperate depositors after the Minister of Finance ordered them to clear long queues caused by cash shortages since late last year or risk closure.

Mining industry executives reported that mines had been flooded after the power outages on both Saturday and Monday. Generators had helped mitigate the impact of the floods but could not to stop them.

The telecommunication systems went down, Internet shops closed, "Generators have ceased to be back-up power supply sources – they are now the primary power supply source," said one businessman shopping for a generator in Harare on Wednesday.

"It's electricity from ZESA (Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority) which is now coming as back up because of unreliable supplies," the businessman, who refused to identify himself, said.

Power outages are very common and regular in Zimbabwe, and have been worsened by a foreign currency crisis that has resulted in the country's power utility failing to import spares to maintain its power generation plants, some of which reportedly require a major overhaul.

ZESA, which recently admitted that Mozambique had cut off supplies amounting to 300 MW to the country due to outstanding debt, says it is battling to raise enough foreign currency for imported spare parts to repair equipment.

Zimbabwe imports about 40% of its power from regional neighbours but often falls into arrears for most of the imports.

ZESA can possibly generate up to 1110MW from its various power plants out of potential capacity of 1680MW.

Yet electricity generation at ZESA's power plants is far below potential capacity.

Power demand for peak periods during the year has often run into 2000MW during certain months - like in June and July last year - despite the fact that most industrial operations are operating at between 30 and 40 percent capacity.

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