

Blackouts hit Zimbabwe

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Harare - Zimbabwe's state power company blamed a series of prolonged, countrywide blackouts over the past week on delayed coal deliveries, equipment breakdowns and interruptions in electricity imports, state media reported Wednesday.

The Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority's woes are a sign of the devastating crisis gripping what was once one of southern Africa's most prosperous economies.

In a brief statement to consumers, the company said Zimbabwe was experiencing 400 to 450 megawatt shortfalls on its daily winter requirement of 2 100 megawatts.

The result has been power cuts of up to seven hours in towns and cities at the height of the southern hemisphere winter. Farmers have also been without electricity to operate irrigation equipment at a critical growing stage for vital crops such as wheat.

The often-violent seizure of thousands of white-owned farms for redistribution to black Zimbabweans, combined with years of drought, have destroyed the country's agriculture-based economy. Inflation has soared to 164 percent, and Zimbabwe is also suffering critical shortages of food, fuel and foreign currency.

A senior official at the power monopoly denied reports that Zimbabwe has been unable to buy electricity from neighboring South Africa and Mozambique because it lacked the foreign currency.

"We have been importing the maximum accessible power from Eskom in South Africa and HCB of Mozambique but cannot match demand due to the winter peak," Obsert Nyatanga, general manager for corporate affairs, said in an interview with the state-run Herald newspaper.

But he said there has been a disruption in electricity supplies from Congo due to a major generator failure there.

Meanwhile, the key Hwange thermal power station in northwestern Zimbabwe has "ground to a halt" due to generator and boiler failures caused by the lack of currency to import spare parts, Nyatanga told The Herald.

He said smaller thermal power stations in the western cities of Bulawayo and Munyati were supplying only 30 percent of normal output due to a shortage of train cars to deliver coal.

On a state visit to China last week, President Robert Mugabe announced that Beijing has offered to provide two 300-megawatt generators for the Hwange plant on undisclosed terms. A controversial 1990s deal with Malaysia's YTL Power International Bhd. to upgrade the facility never materialized.

In another sign of the country's economic troubles, the black market rate for its currency has reportedly soared to 45 000 Zimbabwe dollars to the US dollar, compared to an official rate of 17 500 Zimbabwe dollars.

In a bid to relieve gas stations, where drivers have been waiting in line for weeks to buy fuel that rarely comes, the government is allowing some stations to sell privately imported stocks at US\$1 a liter. The first such station opened on Wednesday, state radio reported. State-imported fuel sells for 10 000 Zimbabwe dollars a liter.

Without paraffin to cook and heat their homes, Zimbabwe's poor are resorting to building wood fires. This in turn is aggravating the denudation of the about 5 000 seized commercial farms as their new owners seek to make a quick profit by selling firewood. - Sapa-AP