

Massive power outage in Bangladesh

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5 November 2014

On Saturday Bangladesh experienced a 12-hour country-wide power blackout, affecting the population of 160 million people. Entire industries, shops and offices across Bangladesh were forced to close. Factory owners turned away their employees. Houses and streets remained dark overnight and hospitals and airports were supplied power through emergency generators. Power was not fully restored until midday Sunday.

The news site *bdnews24.com* reported that all services apart from first aid stopped at Barisal's Sher-e-Bangla Medical College and Hospital when its generator broke down after just two hours. A spokesperson for the National institute of Traumatology and Orthopaedic Rehabilitation in Dhaka said patients there were also "suffering as we don't have a generator." The report noted that patients at Chittagong Medical College and Hospital's general wards "endured severe heat during the outage while the ICU, CCU and post-CCU units operated with the hospital's own generator."

Other essential services were also disrupted. Residents of Mohammadpur, Mirpur and Mohakhali in Dhaka told reporters that "water supply was shut down and they were unable even to meet their basic needs."

This was the worst blackout since Bangladesh was hit by a devastating cyclone in 2007 and the fourth mass power outage since 2003, although there are many smaller power outages every year. Bangladesh is one of the world's most energy-poor countries and is heavily reliant on energy imports.

The blackout was caused by an as-yet unidentified fault at a Power Grid Company transition station that imports electricity from India. Nasrul Hamid, state minister for power and energy, said: "A sudden technical glitch in the power system in Bheramara led to collapse of the entire power grid." The substation has been transmitting electricity imported from the Indian

state of West Bengal since October 2013.

Bangladeshi authorities initially blamed the Indian side, while India rejected the claim. Later Bangladesh's finance minister AMA Muhith admitted to the media that "there was no problem from India's side, the 400 MW [megawatt] line had no problem, either. There was a transmission problem on our side." He added: "Our transmission and distribution system is very poor, which caused the blackout."

Many people expressed outrage over the power cut. "This is terrible," a resident of Dhaka Bashundhara neighborhood told the AFP. "We had some confidence in the government over last few years that the power sector was improving slowly. But what is this?" Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government recently claimed there had been much development in the energy sector.

Dhaka school teacher Rukhsana Begum said: "It was really worrying. The government should find out soon what happened, why it happened? Our inefficiency? Bad network? Whatever, it should be unearthed to avoid future disaster."

Director of Mohammadi Group, a large ready-made garment manufacturer, Rubana Huq, told the media that her company had to shut down production halfway through the afternoon. "We lost production of around 6,000 pieces of clothing worth about \$30,000," she said. The shortened work day meant workers lost half their daily wage.

On Monday the *Daily Star* editorialised: "This is a rude reawakening to the longest power breakdown in recent memory the country has writhed under. In fact, it has been the fourth blackout disaster since October 2003 with the Sidr-inflicted one being the longest in 2007. What lessons did we heed in last seven years to avert the catastrophe on Saturday? Precious little."

Former Director-General of Power Cell and leading electricity expert B.D. Rahmatullah said that "over the past years Bangladesh had put much effort into

increasing generation volume, caring little about the transmission and distribution systems and Saturday's debacle was the outcome of the poor transmission system." The government has declared that it will appoint a probe committee to investigate the outage.

Bangladesh's small and poorly managed infrastructure leads to constant power cuts and shortages, which last year cost the country at least 5.5 percent in lost business revenue, according to the World Bank. Some 40 percent of the population has no access to electricity and per capita energy consumption is one of the lowest in the world. Millions of people use wood, animal waste and crop residues for lighting, cooking and other needs.

Bangladesh has attracted more investment as successive governments have transformed the impoverished country into a cheap labour platform. Many industrial zones have been created in recent years, increasing the demand for electricity. The country produces only 6,000 megawatts per day and consumes roughly 7,000. Apart from India, Dhaka has signed agreements with Russia, Japan, China and the US to develop its power capacity.

India and China are both attempting to increase their influence on Bangladesh by investing in various projects. While India started supplying power from October last year, Bangladesh-China Power Company (Pvt) Limited's coal power plant on the bank of Rabnabad River near Payra maritime port started production from November 1. The country is also seeking to build nuclear power plants with the help of Russia.

Bangladesh's power shortage has its roots in the backwardness of the country's economy, including the privatisation of basic infrastructure. A *Financial Express* editorial on October 22 stated that since 1993 "major sectors for privatisation comprised industry, power, gas and water, transport and communications, trade, agriculture, construction and services."

The paper noted that there had been "irregularities" or corruption in the sale of some state-owned companies, which had been run down or ceased to operate. At the same time it declared that ending privatisations "does not sound realistic." The Saturday power failure will no doubt be used by big business and the government to press ahead with further privatisations, as demanded by the International

Monetary Fund and World Bank.



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