

Fire at Cuban oil storage facility further exacerbates electricity shortages

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A devastating fire that started Friday at the Matanzas Supertanker Base, an oil storage facility near the port of Matanzas, around 130 km from the capital Havana, was finally brought under control on Tuesday. The fire exacted a heavy human toll, with 14 firefighters still reported missing and 125 people injured, including five in critical condition, with one firefighter confirmed dead. The damage also dealt a serious blow to Cuba's electric power generating system, already tottering from lack of maintenance and investment, and will contribute even more to the expanding social and political crisis on the island.

The fire began on Friday night after the eight-tank oil storage facility adjacent to the port, with a maximum capacity of 2.4 million barrels, was hit by lightning during a thunderstorm. The subsequent fire led to a series of explosions at the facility as the tanks caught on fire one after another, igniting a fourth on Monday. The missing and dead firefighters were caught in the explosion of the second tank, which was full, after the fire spilled over from the first, which was only half full.

Firefighters initially struggled to keep the facility cool with water to prevent further tanks from igniting and appealed for international assistance, as they evidently lacked crucial foam needed to fight these sorts of fires as well as the equipment to use it effectively. Mexico and Venezuela sent a combined 140 specialists and firefighters to provide assistance, as well as over 100 tons of foam, chemicals and equipment needed to fight the blaze, including fireboats and helicopters. Later on Tuesday, firefighters were finally able to get close enough to spray foam and water on the remaining smoldering areas.

As a result of the fire, surrounding neighborhoods were evacuated, with 4,900 people affected mostly in the neighborhood of Dubrocq. Officials warned residents to stay indoors or wear face masks following the fire, which contains harmful substances, including sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide and carbon monoxide.

The Matanzas facility plays a central role in distributing Cuban crude oil and imported fuel and crude to power generating stations as well as refineries. Cuba's domestic crude production travels by pipeline directly to the facility, where much of it eventually makes its way to thermoelectric plants around the country. The loss of this source of fuel will exacerbate the already dire electricity crisis.

Additionally, with the loss of this facility, at least temporarily, oil shipments on large ships, including a Russian tanker due within the next week with 115,000 tons of petroleum, have no clear place to dock or unload their cargo. Matanzas is the only terminal rated

to receive larger capacity tankers of over 100,000 dwt.

Officials are reportedly looking at the possibility of using off-shore tankers as storage or sending shipments to other ports with a smaller capacity, and unloading their cargo to other ships. Both of these options would add additional costs for the already cash-strapped government.

On Monday, the Antonio Guiteras thermoelectric plant near Matanzas, one of the largest power plants in the country, was shut down, apparently due to lack of water to maintain operations, because of damage to a pumping station. Both Antonio Guiteras and the Felton plant in eastern Holguín, another large source of electricity production, have recently been taken offline partially or totally as the result of fires and other breakdowns.

Cuba generates about 80 percent of its power by burning fuel oil either at thermoelectric plants like Antonio Guiteras and Felton or at smaller plants which burn diesel. With the two thermoelectric plants out of commission, more diesel fuel has been diverted to power generation, leading to fuel shortages for drivers.

Many of Cuba's 20 power plants are old and in dire need of maintenance, which is hampered by a lack of parts and financial resources. Although Cuba's total generating capacity is 3,000 megawatts (MW), the actual generating capacity is just over 1,800 MW. Liván Arronte, the Cuban Minister of Energy and Mines, indicated before the fire that Cuba's electrical system was capable of generating only two-thirds of peak demand.

Even before the fire, Cuba was experiencing an energy crisis, with parts of the country, including the capital Havana, subject to periodic blackouts to reduce total consumption. Residents of the capital have their electricity cut every three days for around four hours during the midday demand peak. Private businesses with higher energy consumption have had their allocations cut by 20 percent, and state-run companies have told their staff to go on vacation or work from home to further cut power usage.

The lack of electricity has deeply affected the Cuban population, who must in some cases make plans for cooking food without electricity and without effective refrigeration. Power is sometimes cut in the overnight hours, leading to sleeplessness. The power issues at night are also contributing to the ongoing crisis in the health system by increasing the population's vulnerability to mosquitos, as mosquito netting, pesticides and the fuel needed to spread the pesticides are in short supply.

This has contributed to a dangerous outbreak of dengue in the country. Since October of last year, Cuba has recorded 3,036

official cases of the illness. This is an undercount of total cases, as Cuba also lacks the supplies for testing. However, cases of “unspecified fever” reached 14,256 in the first week of July alone, a 42 percent increase over the previous week. At least two children have died of the disease.

Actual case numbers are likely higher, as these represent only those who have had contact with the health system. Cuban Minister of Health José Ángel Portal Miranda indicated in a July 19 meeting that transmission was occurring in eight of Cuba’s provinces, ranging from far western Pinar del Rio all the way east to Guantánamo.

As a result of the ongoing economic crisis, the health system lacks all kinds of supplies. Approximately 38 percent of basic medications have seen shortages this year. Other supplies such as gloves are also lacking, and patients are expected to provide their own bedsheets when they go to the hospital.

After a long period in which the Cuban health system reached milestones for reductions in infant and maternal mortality that vied with those of much wealthier countries, both metrics have seen a sharp uptick since the onset of the pandemic. In 2021 infant mortality reached 7.6 per 1,000 births, up from 5 per 1,000 in 2019. Maternal mortality reached 176.6 out of 100,000 births, up from 37.4 per 100,000 in 2019.

Cuba was severely battered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Even with effective contact tracing and public health measures, as well as the quick development and distribution of its own vaccine, the island was severely lacking in basic supplies, including tests and oxygen. The country also has a large population over the age of 60, around 20 percent, which is highly vulnerable to the disease.

Even though the official total of COVID-19 deaths is 8,529, a study published in *The Lancet* estimating excess COVID-19 deaths through 2021 suggests 26,600 lost their lives, or 126.8 per 100,000. Although this rate is better than the United States or the Latin America and Caribbean region as a whole, it is far worse than what the country would have been capable of had it been fully equipped.

The cutoff of international tourism during the pandemic drastically reduced the amount of hard currency available for the country to meet its import needs. Cuba imports between 60 to 70 percent of its food, requiring \$2 billion per year. As a result of the lack of tourism, and a sugar harvest that was half of what was expected and the worst since the 18th century, imports have been scaled back, down 40 percent since 2019. Many suppliers are demanding cash on delivery and have not been paid for months.

Food and other basic items are in short supply, and the government recently announced residents of Havana would be restricted to purchasing groceries and other essentials at state run stores within their home “municipality.” There are even shortages of milk powder, provision of which to children and those with special needs was long considered a central achievement of the Castro government.

Cubans have also been hit badly by inflation. Officially, inflation last year was 77 percent and 28 percent this year, but some estimates put the number for 2021 much higher, at up to 500 percent. Recently, the peso was devalued, with the official exchange rate going from 24 pesos per dollar to 120 pesos per

dollar, bringing it in line with the black market rate.

The NATO war in Ukraine has also affected tourism, as the closing of western airspace to Russian airlines has reduced the number of Russian tourists visiting the island. Notably, the Cuban government abstained on the hypocritical UN vote condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as Cuba itself has been trying to deepen its own relations with the European Union.

Nearly a quarter of Cuban tourists in 2021 were Russian, 150,000 out of 575,000 total, and Russia was the biggest single source of visitors during the pandemic. So far through June, this year has seen only about 700,000 visitors to the island, well below the 2.5 million goal. In the years prior to the pandemic Cuba saw around 4 million tourists per year.

As a result of these conditions, created by decades of sanctions as well as the failure of the Cuban regime’s policies, including the increasing turn to market economics, Cuba is a social powder keg.

Blackouts were the immediate cause of the protests last year which resulted in mass arrests and crackdowns. On June 13, the government announced it was sentencing 297 people to between five and 25 years in prison, while 84 were sanctioned but released, with warnings that further involvement in protests would result in prison sentences.

From October of last year alone, around 150,000 Cubans have fled the island, with 140,000 taken into custody at the US-Mexico border. While the large majority represents better-off layers who can afford a plane ticket to Mexico, the number leaving exceeds even that of the Mariel boat-lift in 1980.

The Cuban government has no answers to the compounding crises besides continued austerity and repression. As in most other countries, it’s becoming increasingly impossible for Cuban workers to live under these conditions. But it is vitally important for the Cuban working class to draw the essential lessons from the failures of Castroism and build a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Cuba.



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