Massive blackout paralyses Spain and Portugal

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A massive blackout on Monday brought Spain and Portugal to a virtual standstill, affecting tens of millions across the Iberian Peninsula. Subway networks, hospitals, airports, traffic lights, ATMs and telecommunications systems collapsed in scenes that brought a 21st-century population back to 19th-century conditions.

The outage, which began shortly after midday, left major cities like Madrid, Barcelona, Lisbon, Seville and Valencia paralysed. It also led to smaller blackouts and internet outages in parts of Morocco and southern France. As of nightfall yesterday, electricity grid operators had reportedly only been able to reestablish service for 20 percent of the population in Spain, and 10 percent in Portugal.

Social and economic life ground to a halt across the Iberian peninsula. Water mains and cell phones ceased functioning across much of the peninsula. Traffic collapsed into gridlock as non-functioning traffic lights turned roadways into death traps. In Madrid, Mayor José Luis Martínez-Almeida ordered the closure of the four main tunnels of the M-30 ring road. Adif, Spain's state rail operator, suspended all services "until further notice" after trains and subways stopped, leaving masses of people trapped, many underground, in the dark.

Spanish Transport Minister Oscar Puente said the "main priority" was rescuing those trapped in trains, and that train stations would remain open "to help the lives of people who had to take the train and have no other choice than to spend the night there."

Emergency services had to mount numerous operations to rescue people trapped in elevators that also suddenly stopped amid the blackout. In hospitals, only backup generators prevented disaster. Non-urgent interventions were suspended, and medical staff scrambled to maintain critical surgeries, life-support systems and patients relying on oxygen machines, who cannot survive long without electricity.

Industry and commerce collapsed. Shops and supermarkets were forced to close or operate cash-only as card payments and ATMs failed. In Terrassa, near Barcelona, shops selling generators were stripped bare by desperate residents. Across Spain and Portugal, industrial giants including Seat, Ford, Repsol and ArcelorMittal suspended operations—an economic shock compounded by widespread retail closures and disrupted supply chains already affected by Washington's trade war tariffs.

Airports in Madrid, Barcelona, and Lisbon were plunged into chaos, operating on emergency generators as flights were delayed or cancelled. TAP Air Portugal instructed passengers not to come to the airport. Dutch tourist Marc Brandsma, stranded in Lisbon, told the Associated Press: "We haven't seen any plane arriving or departing in the 50 minutes we've been waiting here."

In the meantime, electricity companies are scrambling to reestablish service. Spain's Nuclear Safety Council stated around 5 p.m. yesterday that Spain's seven nuclear reactors were not in danger of overheating, despite the cutoff of electricity. Three reactors were offline, and the remaining four were automatically disconnected from the grid; emergency generators switched on to ensure the continued functioning of essential cooling and maintenance systems.

France's Electricity Transport Network (RTE) said it was working with its Spanish and Portuguese counterparts to transmit first 750MW and then 900MW of electricity into the Iberian peninsula. This will facilitate restarting production, as plants across the peninsula are brought back online gradually, to avoid

overloading connections inside Spain and Portugal.

Both the Spanish and Portuguese cabinets convened emergency sessions as they scrambled to contain the fallout. Amid unsubstantiated rumors of a Russian cyberattack that could have caused the outage, Spain's intelligence services, including the National Centre of Cryptology and National Centre of Intelligence, launched an investigation into a possible cyberattack. There were also reports of a fire in southern France that could have taken out key electricity distribution interchanges with Spain.

As of this writing, however, Spanish and Portuguese authorities have said there was no evidence of a cyberattack. Portuguese Prime Minister Luis Montenegro said there was "no indication" of foreign interference, in a speech in which he announced a state of emergency to allow for the state to send availabile electricity to the most vital consumers, such as hospitals.

Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez announced that the Spanish government had assumed direct management of the blackout response in three regions: Andalusia, Extremadura and Madrid. Speaking from his official residence at La Moncloa, Sánchez warned: "We still do not have conclusive information about the causes of this outage, so I ask citizens to get their information through official channels. It is better not to speculate, we do not rule out any hypothesis."

He urged Spanish people not to go out in their vehicles and to limit their use of electrical devices, adding: "We must focus on restoring the supply of electricity."

While it is too early to determine with certainty what caused the blackout, initial analyses of the electrical grid suggest that the blackout had natural causes that interacted with a broader failure to make sufficient investments in the grid.

Portugal's National Electricity Network (REN) issued a statement declaring: "Due to extreme temperature variations in the interior of Spain, there were anomalous oscillations in the very high voltage lines (400 kV), a phenomenon known as 'induced atmospheric vibration'. These oscillations caused synchronisation failures between the electrical systems, leading to successive disturbances across the interconnected European network."

Georg Zachmann, a senior fellow at the Bruegel think tank in Brussels, told the *Guardian* that this led the grid frequency to fall below the European standard of 50Hz, with "cascading disconnections of power plants." He added that putting more renewables like solar and wind plants onto the grid, with more intermittent and unpredictable power output, requires more investment to ensure that this intermittency does not disrupt the grid frequency: "You cannot ignore it. You need the tools to keep the system running."

The blackout has exposed the fragility of Spain and Portugal's privatised electrity infrastructure. There have been warnings since the beginning of the year that Spain's energy grid was suffering chronic vulnerabilities created by decades of deregulation and the chaotic expansion of renewables without investment in stabilising infrastructure. As *El Economista* explained earlier this year, Red Eléctrica had long been struggling with "elevated voltage oscillations" due to the combination of falling energy demand and the massive integration of renewable energy.

The situation became critical enough that the National Commission for Markets and Competition (CNMC) warned in January, "The system is losing margin for action in exceptional situations, with voltage levels reaching or even surpassing regulatory limits at certain points." Indeed, a recent electrical incident in Madrid, where control problems disabled one of the most important train stations in the country, Chamartín, prefigured Monday's national-scale collapse.

These blackouts expose the failures of capitalist electricity policies in Europe, which prioritise market deregulation and "green" investment profits over system resilience and public safety.