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News



Photo: 37-year-old Lwandile Zwane of Khayelitsha in Capetown has become used to power outages and has learnt to adjust her daily domestic schedule to match with electricity blackouts in South Africa—courtesy of Lwandile Zwane.

Energy Poverty Grips Southern Africa

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By Jeffrey Moyo

CAPETOWN, South Africa, 01 March 2023 (IDN) — Thirty-seven-year-old Lwandile Zwane of Khayelitsha and her two daughters have their super by 4 pm to beat the six-hour electricity outage across Capetown.

Characterized by slum settlements, Khayelitsha is a township in South Africa's Cape Town where power outages have not spared many poor South Africans as the African country contends with energy shortages.

In Zimbabwe, many urban dwellers like 45-year-old Tania Muravi living in the country's capital Harare's Mbare Township, have equally contended with massive power shortages as authorities ration electricity for up to 18 hours a day.

Dependent on the water in the Kariba dam shared between Zimbabwe and Zambia, Zambia has also had to struggle with electricity deficits, leaving many people there enduring several hours of power cuts.

In fact, energy poverty is pounding a number of Southern African countries, with electricity blackouts turning out to be common in several countries, including Zimbabwe, South Africa and Zambia.

The countries are battling with ageing thermal power stations and failing to cope with often dwindling water levels in lakes supplying water to regional hydropower stations.

Angry, South Africa's Zwane said she has had to adjust her domestic chores in order to cope with the power crisis in her country.

"The way I run my life and that of my family has had to change because each time, I have to match with the availability of electricity, which goes off at odd hours, usually when we most need it. Imagine I have to ensure dinner is ready by 3:30 pm every day because power goes off from then on for over six to eight hours," Zwane told IDN.

For South Africans like Zwane in Capetown, severe power cuts have meant that their food supplies have had to come under threat.

This has disrupted the lives of millions of South Africans, including chicken farmers who rely on electricity to power the cold rooms and refrigerators, preserving huge volumes of slaughtered chickens for sale.

Poor Zwane said many like herself now hardly access affordable chickens in supermarkets as power deficits have also meant the prices have had to rise.

Yet of late, chickens have been one of the most affordable sources of animal protein across South Africa.

Pounded even harder by the electricity crisis, South Africa's popular food outlets like Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) closed some of its 750 fried chicken restaurants in the country at the end of last year.

Mobile network telephone companies that somehow have also to shoulder the costs of buying diesel fuel to power generators to enable them to stay in business amidst mounting power cuts.

For Zimbabwe's Muravi, every day, amid electricity rationing that lasts for as much as 18 hours per day, she has had to switch to a wood fire in order to cook for her family.

Buying firewood from vendors in the vicinity of her home has become the only way to cope with mounting power shortages for Muravi.

With Muravi failing to afford candle lighting, her school-going children have to rely on the wood fire each time they do their school homework.

The children have become used to the energy poverty and now have fun doing homework using a wood fire made by their mother each evening.

As many Southern Africans like Muravi bear the brunt of energy poverty, her country faces the power crisis that has for many years been a result of ageing equipment at its main power plants, Kariba Hydro and Hwange Thermal Power stations.

In fact, Zimbabwe's power crisis took a turn for the worse late last year, and families like Muravi's and South African businesses, for instance, have not been spared by the power crisis, with load shedding largely happening anytime now in Zimbabwe.

"I tell you, we now don't know when the next power cut will happen or how long it will last. Just yesterday (February 26), the power went off at 10 pm, and up to now, there is still no power," said Zimbabwe's Muravi.

Unfinished power stations have also added to the electricity crisis in Zimbabwe, with the country's 600MW power station under construction by the Chinese in Hwange since 2020 still incomplete.

Neighbouring Zimbabwe to the north is Zambia, which has of late not been spared by power deficits.

Just about a month ago, Zambia's state-owned electricity company, the Zambia Electricity Supply Corporation (ZESCO) went on record in the media saying that its "ability to meet power demand" remained "constrained by the drastic reduction in available water in the Kariba reservoir for electricity generation at Kariba North Bank Power Station".

According to Zambian authorities, "the power station's generating capacity has been reduced from its installed 1080 MW to below 400MW."

Hit by energy shortages, in December last year, Zambia's energy minister had projected a power rationing schedule lasting up to a maximum of six hours a day.

Malawi, also located in Southern Africa, has not been spared from power deficits.

In September last year, daily power blackouts pounded Malawi for several hours as the Electricity Supply Corporation of Malawi (ESCOM) struggled to sustain power supplies.

Yet while presiding over the official opening of the 2022 Malawi Investment Forum (MIF) in the capital Lilongwe, Malawian President Lazarus Chakwera claimed the incessant power outages were a "temporary headache."

Last year, Malawi's Energy Minister, Ibrahim Matola, broke down in tears while addressing a press conference as his Ministry and power firms failed to provide solutions to persistent blackouts in the poor Southern African nation.

Meanwhile, Malawi is among the least electrified countries in the world, with only 7-12% of the population connected to the national electricity grid, while the rural electrification rate remains below two per cent.

In Malawi's urban areas, power outages of up to 24 hours or more have become common.

Energy poverty has also equally hammered Mozambique to the core, even as the African country is known for exporting excess energy to South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Despite Mozambique's huge potential for generation capacity, only 34% of the population has access to electricity. This is due to an underdeveloped transmission and distribution network, lack of financing and the bureaucracy involved in developing new power projects.

Mozambique's rural communities' access to electricity remains low, while urban centres have, over the years, suffered poor service quality.

In Namibia, an estimated 70-80% of rural households do not have access to electricity while figures in urban localities are much better, while around 70% of households in urban areas are connected to the power grid.

In fact, with 2,5 million people, half of Namibia still has no access to electricity, with over 300 000 households, particularly in rural areas, remaining unelectrified.

Namibia's Energy Ministry has, however, been on record in the media, saying it has set a target to electrify every household in the country by 2040.

But according to the country's Electricity Control Board (ECB), the Minister could be building castles in the air, as under four houses are connected to the grid per year. [IDN-InDepthNews]

NEWSLETTER

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