

Kurds Struggle to Generate Own Supplies

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The authorities in Iraqi Kurdistan have sought to deal with their power shortages by striking its own electricity provision deals, but locals have seen little benefit from them.

In the north of Iraq, buildings are going up and oil wells are being drilled, while tens of thousands of Iraqi families escaping violence in the south have fled to Kurdish areas to set up businesses or find work.

But Iraqi Kurdistan's infrastructure cannot provide for the region's four million population, never mind cope with the additional pressure of new businesses and residents.

Electricity shortages are the main source of public dissatisfaction with the authorities in Erbil and Sulaimaniyah. The third Iraqi Kurdish province, Duhok, receives power from neighbouring Turkey and cuts are rare.

Electricity supplies in Iraqi Kurdistan have been irregular ever since it broke away from Saddam Hussein's Iraq to become a semi-autonomous region 16 years ago, leaving it cut off from the country's power grid.

Nearly two decades later, the KRG has made little headway in improving the electricity supply despite its high level of autonomy. The local authorities have promised for years that power provision will get better, but fed up residents say they will only believe it when they see it.

"The government doesn't solve the [electricity] crisis," said Sirwan Mohammad, editor-in-chief of the Kurdish magazine Pishasazi, which covers the north's industries. "It only manages the problem."

The KRG's ministry of electricity reports it can only provide about half of the power demanded. The region is now re-connected to the central government's weak national power grid, but the authorities here seem to feel that the answer to their woes is to look for alternative suppliers.

The KRG has signed several electricity provision deals in recent years, most of which have never been completed or made minimal or no impact.

In one example, the authorities paid one million US dollars in 2006 to extend electricity pylons into Iran to receive supplies from its neighbour. The deal failed.

The regional government, which has close ties with Iran, balked when the Iranians demanded a minimum ten-year power supply contract. Shawnim Mohammed, head of the Kurdistan regional electricity directorate, said the proposed length of the contract was too long.

Mohammed, however, says difficulties around acquiring a reliable source of power is just part of the

problem, "The issue is very complicated. Even if we have more power the problem won't be solved because the transmission and distribution systems are very old and need to be completely overhauled."

The government insists it is making concerted efforts to improve electricity and build proper infrastructure and says that its current projects will provide Iraqi Kurdistan with about 80 per cent power needs.

Sulaimaniyah province has at least 243 million dollars worth of electricity-generating projects underway, while a 300 million dollar liquefied natural gas-fuelled power plant is being built in Erbil that would generate about 500 megawatts of power.

The World Bank has given the KRG a 40 million dollar loan for a hydropower project in Dukan and Derbendikhan in Sulaimaniyah province as part of a 400 million dollar loan package to improve Iraq's electricity system.

But the projects are not all running smoothly. The Erbil power plant, which was announced last year and was supposed to be completed in July, will not be finished until next year.

Foreign engineers left Erbil - one of Iraq's safest provinces - following a May 2007 truck bomb in the city and technical problems have further held up the project, said KRG minister of electricity Hushyar Siwalili.

The Kurdistan Industrial Union, an NGO that monitors business in the region, estimates that 300 small businesses have recently had to close because they didn't have enough electricity and couldn't afford private generators.

Up to 100 generators were sold every day in Sulaimaniyah province in 2005 and 2006. But while they've offered residents some respite from the power shortages, they've put them at risk of serious injury and even death.

More than 2,000 people were burned and 520 died in generator-related accidents in 2005 and 2006, according to figures from Sulaimaniyah Emergency Hospital.

Most of accidents have occurred when people have tried to refuel their generators without turning them off, such as 18-year-old Bryar Suleiman, who was set ablaze in February when his generator caught fire.

"If the government would have solved the electricity problem, we would not have resorted to using generators," said Bryar's mother, Fawziyah. "My son would not have died."

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