

Powers of Darkness in North Afghanistan

Author: [Abdul Latif Sahak](#)

Electricity shortages as power grid project goes nowhere.

Although the northern Afghan city of Mazar-e Sharif enjoys a measure of stability and a conveniently-located source of electricity, residents say they are only getting a couple of hours of power a day.

Apart from making life more difficult in the summer heat, the power outages have led to fears of infection due to problems with keeping foodstuffs cool.

Residents are angered that the massive amounts of aid money injected into Afghanistan has failed to improve electricity supplies, a basic building-block of economic development.

People in Mazar-e Sharif get between one and three hours of electricity every 24 hours. IWPR interviewed one man, Fereidun, who said he had an hour a day, but with a current so weak that it would not run his refrigerator.

"You see, I can't bear this hot weather even though I'm an adult. How can children bear it?" Fereidun said, fanning himself as he sat under a tree in front of his house. "I use this fan on my children all night. Sometimes I even pass out. If there was electricity, I wouldn't have these problems, as I own [an electric] fan and a refrigerator."

Fereidun placed the blame squarely on local government, saying, "For God's sake, every government official in the province has been working for the last ten years as if he inherited his post. If they can't work, others must replace them."

Industrialists in the city say they are cutting back production or closing down altogether because they cannot run their machines.

Khwaja Amir described how he had stopped production at his plastic goods factory for the past three months.

"I had to close my factory because of the power shortage, as using [diesel-powered] generators would have increased my prices so much that people wouldn't have been able to afford my goods," he said.

Khwaja Amir said he had been forced to lay off his workforce of around 100 people.

"This government doesn't want to address unemployment... it doesn't support domestic industries, yet it leaves the doors wide open to foreign-made products," he said.

Faqir Mohammad owns an ice factory and has found that demand is high enough for him to pay for generators and double his prices.

"We're using generators even though fuel is expensive," he said. "Although we aren't making a big profit, we have to keep producing ice because the people need it so badly."

Sayed Taher Roshanzadah, head of the chamber of commerce for Balkh province, of which Mazar-e Sharif is the main urban centre, said dozens of factories producing goods, packaging fruit and making non-alcoholic drinks had folded, putting thousands of people out of work.

"The electricity shortage has increased the prices of Afghan products. No one buys them, and when they don't sell, the owner is forced to close his factory," he said.

Roshanzadah said the lack of power was an obstacle to future investment that would otherwise be forthcoming because of the relative security established in this part of Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, public health and environmental officials are warning that the electricity shortage is leading to a rise in the incidence of disease among children.

Paediatric specialist Dr Ahmad Forough said more and more children were being admitted to the Mazar-e Sharif hospital where he works, mainly for dehydration, diarrhoea, and food poisoning.

"Many families use meals left over from the previous day, and the food becomes contaminated and leads to diseases when there are no refrigerators," he explained.

Gholam Nabi Khorami, director of environmental protection in Mazar-e Sharif, said the heavy use of diesel

generators by industry, businesses and homeowners was causing alarming levels of pollution – another source of illness – as well as pumping out heat in an already hot part of the country.

Balkh is luckier than most provinces as it gets electricity imported from neighbouring Uzbekistan under a long-standing arrangement. In Mazar-e Sharif, therefore, the problem is not that there is no supply, but that the crumbling power distribution network cannot transmit current.

Officials say the grid can sustain a maximum of 20 megawatts, and needs to be upgraded to meet the total demand, put at 70 MW. Engineer Naser, head of the electricity department for Balkh province, said adequate levels of power were reaching local substations, but the 27-year-old city distribution network could not carry the current.

In 2008, with 23 million US dollars in World Bank funding, Afghanistan's energy and water ministry contracted two companies, one Afghan and the other Indian, to completely replace the network in Mazar-e Sharif.

The work has yet to be completed.

Engineer Naser said everything had ground to a halt because of a dispute over quality between the two contractors and a German firm brought in to supervise the project

Guillermo Siapno, an engineer heading up the supervisory work, confirmed the nature of the dispute, saying, "We will not allow the Afghan and Indian companies to continue with the work unless they meet a high standard."

The Indian contractor, ATPS, refused requests for an interview, but the head of the Afghan company A-T-SL, Mohammad Zaher, blamed excessive bureaucracy and uncooperative local government officials. He said the German project inspectors did not raise concerns when 1,800 electricity poles and new lines were installed, and only complained about the quality later, meaning the work would have to be redone at great cost.

Meanwhile, the Afghan energy ministry had fined the two contractors two million dollars for failing to complete on time. "If things continue like this, we will be unable to complete the work," he added.

Power shortages and the associated problems are not unique to Balkh; every other province and even the capital Kabul have intermittent or very limited electricity.

Hydroelectric dams could provide an answer, but those that exist are decades old. Projects to build new schemes or restore old ones have been hampered by the ongoing Taliban insurgency, and – many believe – by neighbouring states reluctant to see reduced water levels in cross-border rivers. (For more on these allegations, see [**Iran Faces Renewed Afghan Dam Sabotage Claims**](#) and [**Iran Again Accused of Trying to Halt Afghan Dam.**](#))

Abdul Latif Sahak is an IWPR-trained reporter in Balkh Province.

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