

## **Egypt power cuts deepen suffering in fasting month**

**CAIRO** - Since Muslims began their daily dawn-to-dusk fast for the holy month of Ramadan two weeks ago, Egypt has been hit by its worst power outages in decades.

The cuts at the height of summer with daily temperatures hovering around 100 degrees, along with rising food prices and water shortages, have Egyptians fuming, sweating and cursing during a month in which their sacrifices are supposed to bring them closer to God.

Newspapers nearly every day run photographs of families huddled in near darkness around candles or oil lamps. And Egyptians are venting their frustration on the government, adding to a list of grievances over what critics argue is its rampant disregard for anything other than catering to the elite and holding on to power.

"They often cut us off 15 or 20 minutes after iftar," said Ali Ibrahim, a 23-year-old university student who lives in one of Cairo's most crowded, low-income neighbourhoods, referring to the sunset break fast meal. "That hardly gives us enough time to pray and eat. What makes it worse is that when the power is off, so is the water. So, you have no electricity, you are sweating and you cannot cool off with a shower," he added. "It's too much."

Last week, an angry crowd temporarily blockaded part of a major highway south of Cairo with a barricade of burning tyres. Others have called on the embattled electricity minister to quit while newspaper reports maintain that the outages have led to a spike in crime in parts of the country.

Egyptian officials say the blackouts - that mostly hit during the evenings for up to three hours even in the swankiest of Cairo neighbourhoods - are necessary to protect the national grid from collapse as a result of higher-than-usual consumption caused by an enduring heatwave.

They have sought to reassure the public with a flurry of announcements about bolstering power capacity in coming months, while urging consumers to reduce waste. They have also debunked reports in the country's independent media that the export of natural gas to Israel has left them with insufficient fuel to run their gas-fired power stations.

Complaints about services - or the lack of them - are not new in Egypt, where nearly half of the 80 million citizens live below or near poverty-level income of about \$2 a day.

Since the start of the year, Egyptians have protested over rising food prices, a new minimum wage and better working conditions. But the gripes about the power have resonated given the onset of Ramadan. They are another mark against President Hosni Mubarak's ruling party ahead of parliamentary elections in November and presidential polls next year.

During the month of Ramadan, devout Muslims abstain from food and drink and try to cleanse their thoughts and emotions of anger and other ills. The sacrifices, which also include no smoking or sex during the fast hours, are aimed at bringing them closer to God and gain better appreciation of what they have.

But the outages have tested that resolve.

"Unfortunately, the government is dealing with this crisis in a manner that is biased in favour of the rich," said Mahmoud Al Askalany, head of the Society of Citizens Against Rising Prices, a consumer rights group. "They are keeping the power in the cities where the rich live and cutting it off from villages."

Asked in a television interview earlier this week how long the outages would last, Mohammed Awad, the head of the Egyptian Electricity Holding Company which controls the country's state-run electricity firms, responded: "As long as people are refusing to cooperate."

The cuts "will continue until God brings down the temperature and people stop switching on all their air conditioners," he said.

The country's estimated generation capacity of 25,000 megawatts has been sorely tested, with consumption hitting over 23,000 megawatts.

"It is a problem of management and not capacity," said Wael Ziada, chief Egypt economist at Cairo-based investment bank EFG-Hermes.

Cabinet spokesman Magdy Rady said this week that Egypt would start up a new 375-megawatt power station north of Cairo and hopes to boost output from the Aswan High Dam's hydroelectric turbines by 175 megawatts. Later in the year, another power station south of Cairo is slated to come online, producing an additional 140 megawatts.

That may come too late to cool tempers during Ramadan.

Last week, Mubarak, Egypt's ruler of nearly 30 years, took the unusual step of summoning the oil and electricity ministers to his office for urgent - and highly publicised - talks on the blackouts. Days later, on Monday, Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif convened the supreme energy council to discuss the issue.

For critics, such steps offer little more than the tired photo ops and platitudes offered by officials as each new problem surfaces in the country