

Venezuela plunges into darkness amidst widespread outage

08/03/2019 13:21 by admin

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People get on a bus during a blackout in Caracas, Venezuela March 7, 2019. (Reuters)

Caracas: Much of Venezuela plunged into darkness Thursday evening, creating chaos as people struggled to navigate their way home amid what appeared to be one of the biggest blackouts yet in a country where power failures have become common.

Commuters took to the sidewalks in Caracas after subway service stopped and a snarl of cars jammed the streets with stoplights out.

State-owned electricity operator Corpoelec blamed the outage on what it called an "attack" on the Guri Dam, one of the world's largest hydroelectric stations and the cornerstone of Venezuela's electrical grid.

"We've been targeted again in the power war," Maj. Gen. Luis Motta, President Nicolas Maduro's minister of electrical power, said on state television.

Information Minister Jorge Rodriguez called the blackout a criminal act by right-wing extremists intent on creating chaos by leaving Venezuelans without power for several days. He said Maduro's government had defeated the "sabotage" and already restored power in the country's eastern region.

General view of the city during a blackout in Caracas, Venezuela March 7, 2019. (Reuters)

Pro-government officials frequently blame power outages on Venezuela's opposition, accusing them of attacking power substations with Molotov cocktails, though they rarely provide any evidence.

Officials did not indicate how much of Venezuela had lost power, though local media said nearly all of the country had been blacked out.

Motto said it would take "approximately three hours" for service to be fully restored, though patience was running thin as the blackout dragged on.

People cross a street during a blackout in Caracas, Venezuela March 7, 2019. (Reuters)

In one Caracas neighbourhood, residents threw up their windows and began banging on pots and pans in a sign of protest while others shouted out expletives and Maduro's name.

The outage comes as Venezuela is in the throes of a political struggle between Maduro and opposition leader Juan Guaido, who is recognized by about 50 nations as Venezuela's rightful president.

The opposition blames Maduro's socialist policies for Venezuela's hyperinflation and severe shortages of food and medicine. Maduro accuses Guaido of conspiring with the Trump administration in a campaign to overthrow him.

Guaido took to Twitter Tuesday evening to blast Maduro for the outage.

“How do you tell a mom who needs to cook, an ill person who depends on a machine, a worker who should be laboring that we are in a powerful country without electricity?” he wrote, using the hashtag (hash)SinLuz, meaning without light. “Venezuela is clear that the light will return with the end of usurpation.”

Venezuela's electrical system was once the envy of Latin America but it has fallen into a state of disrepair after years of poor maintenance and mismanagement. High-ranking officials have been accused in US court proceedings of looting government money earmarked for the electrical system.

The government subsidizes the electricity system's costs to keep home power bills exceptionally low just a couple dollars a month.

- AP