

Massive blackout hobbles South America, power trickling back

BUENOS AIRES: Power began to trickle back into the grid by midday after a massive blackout hit Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay early yesterday, leaving tens of millions without power, authorities said. Argentina's grid "collapsed" around 7 am local time (1100 GMT), leaving the entire country without power, Argentina's Energy Secretariat said in a statement. The outage also cut electricity to swaths of neighboring Uruguay and Paraguay.

Energy distributors in Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay, whose populations total nearly 55 million, said power was being restored to major cities, including Montevideo and Buenos Aires. Argentina's energy agency said in a statement it had begun investigating the causes of the outage, but had not provided further details by midday. Energy company Edesur Argentina said it had returned service to 450,000 of its clients in the greater Buenos Aires area by noon local time (1600 GMT), but called the outage "exceptional" and said it would likely take the rest of the day before power was completely restored.

Uruguay power company UTE said on social media that power had returned to parts of Montevideo and the southern coast of Uruguay. In Paraguay, the capital of Asuncion was unaffected by the outage but local providers said they were restoring power to smaller cities and rural areas. The massive blackout on Father's Day left Buenos Aires dark early this morning, hobbling public transportation, cutting off water supply and crippling phone and internet communications across the city.

Images from social media showed long lines of cars at the few service stations still in operation in Argentina's capital city and traffic lights dark, creating chaos in places even on a normally quiet Sunday. "The city is a

disaster. There are no traffic lights. Stores aren't open. It spoiled Father's Day," said 75-year-old retiree Liliana Comis, of Buenos Aires.

It is Father's Day in Argentina and some restaurants were expecting many customers. The Tobago bar in the Boedo neighborhood of Buenos Aires had been fully booked for lunch. "It had to happen today," said 60-year-old waiter Pedro Salinas. "They've cut off our legs," he added, using a famous phrase uttered by football great Diego Maradona when he was kicked out of the 1994 World Cup after testing positive for drugs.

The outage also spilled over into local and national politics. Alberto Fernandez, a Peronist presidential candidate looking to unseat incumbent Mauricio Macri in this year's hotly contested election, tweeted that "the President should...give an explanation for what Argentines are suffering". Macri had yet to make a statement on social media as of late morning in Argentina. Argentina's Energy Secretariat said in a statement mid-morning yesterday that it expected power to be restored in several hours.

Elsewhere in Argentina, several provinces were forced to temporarily delay local elections slated for yesterday. Argentine state oil company YPF did not immediately respond to requests for comments on how the outage had impacted its operations. Argentina is home to the Vaca Muerta shale formation, one of the world's biggest reserves of shale gas and oil. A spokesman for Brazil's power system operator (ONS) said the outage had not impacted the regional neighbor to the north. Argentina and Uruguay have a common power grid centered on the bi-national Salto Grande dam, 450 km north of Buenos Aires. — Agencies



BUENOS AIRES: Downtown Buenos Aires is seen during a power cut yesterday. — AFP

Bibi unveils 'Trump Heights'...

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family's legal woes are far from over - the veteran premier himself faces possible indictment for bribery, fraud and breach of trust in the coming months. In a deal approved by judge Avital Chen at Jerusalem magistrates' court, Sara Netanyahu was found guilty of using the errors of government accounting staff to bypass spending restrictions. She was fined 10,000 shekels (\$2,800) and ordered to reimburse the state a further 45,000 shekels.

Although her husband is a millionaire she asked for payment to be deferred and the judge allowed her to pay in monthly installments beginning in September. "The deal reached between the sides is worthy and appropriately reflects the deeds and their severity on the criminal level," Chen said in his ruling. The 60-year-old, a high-profile presence at her husband's side throughout his long tenure in office, was initially charged in June 2018 with fraud and breach of trust for paying \$100,000 for meals from well-known Jerusalem businesses. She had done so while falsely declaring there was no cook available at the PM's official residence.

The amended indictment, approved yesterday, dropped the graft charges, replacing them with "obtaining a benefit by deliberately exploiting the mistake of another person". "Despite the fact that cooks were employed at the residence the accused instructed staff at the residence, as a matter of normal practice, to order prepared meals from restaurants for herself, her family and visitors." The tiny courtroom at the Jerusalem magistrates' court was packed with journalists. "As in every plea bargain, each side makes concessions, sometimes hard concessions," prosecutor Erez Padan said. "It is right and proper for the public interest

to bring this case to an end."

Netanyahu's attorney Yossi Cohen told the court his client had already been heavily punished by the media. "Four years of ugly leaks and denigrations" constituted "inhuman punishment", he said. "No other person could have withstood this, this lady is made of steel," Cohen added. Sara Netanyahu has a reputation for finding legal loopholes to receive state funding for her household's relatively high expenses. "On a number of occasions she instructed that restaurant chefs be brought in to cook for guests at the residence, all in deliberate exploitation of the bookkeepers' mistakes," the amended charge sheet said. The caterers included an Italian restaurant, a Middle Eastern grill joint and a sushi house.

The prosecution attorneys put a positive face on what was generally considered a good outcome for Sara Netanyahu yesterday. "The significance of this ruling is that a person with access to public funds, as senior as they may be, cannot use them as their own," Padan's co-counsel Jenny Avni told reporters outside the courtroom. "Taking significant amounts of public funds over several years, in violation of the rules and procedures, is a criminal offence carrying with it a conviction and a real financial penalty."

Sara Netanyahu is also being sued by a former cleaner who claims the premier's wife mistreated her. In 2016 a court awarded some \$47,000 in damages to a former housekeeper who accused her of repeated workplace abuse in a similar case. Separately, Benjamin Netanyahu is facing possible indictment for bribery, fraud and breach of trust in the months ahead. Two people wearing t-shirts with the message "crime minister" were barred from entering the court for his wife's hearing yesterday.

He is reportedly seeking legislation that would result in him being granted immunity. However, he was unable to form a coalition following an April general election, and Israel is now gearing up for September polls. In a Facebook post late Saturday, he declared his wife a "real heroine" who was "a punching bag for the media". — AFP

Adam Schiff, head of the House Intelligence Committee and a leading Democratic critic of the administration, said the evidence of Iranian involvement "is very strong and compelling". "And in fact, I think this was a Class-A screw-up by Iran to insert a mine on the ship," he said on CBS's "Face the Nation". "It didn't detonate, they had to go back and retrieve it. I can imagine there are some Iranian heads rolling from that botched operation," he said. The administration's struggle to persuade its allies, however, "shows just how isolated the United States has become," he added.

The Saudi crown prince also accused "Iran and its proxies" over May 12 attacks on four tankers anchored in the Gulf of Oman off the UAE port of Fujairah. Attacks on Saudi Arabia by Iran-aligned Yemeni rebels have further fuelled tensions in the region. On Friday, the kingdom intercepted five drones launched by the Houthi rebels, a Riyadh-led coalition said, in a second assault on an airport in the country's southwest in two days. The drones targeted Abha airport, where a rebel missile on Wednesday left 26 civilians wounded, and the nearby city of Khamis Mushait, which houses a major airbase, the coalition said.

A Yemeni rebel drone targeting Abha was also intercepted Saturday, but it caused no casualties or damage. The Houthi rebels declared drone attacks on the airports of Abha and southern Jizan city, with a spokesman on rebel-run Al-Masirah TV promising "painful days" for the Saudi regime in response to its bombing campaign in Yemen. The rebels claimed their drones targeted a fuel station at Abha airport and control rooms for unmanned aerial vehicles at Jizan airport.

The US military said in its statement yesterday that one of its drones was shot down over Yemen by Houthi rebels on June 6. The rebels, who have faced persistent coalition bombing since March 2015 that has exacted a heavy civilian death toll, have stepped up attacks across the border in recent weeks. Prince Mohammed said Saudi Arabia would "not accept the presence of militias on its borders". Riyadh has repeatedly accused Tehran of arming the rebels with sophisticated weapons, a charge the Islamic republic denies. — Agencies

Heat wave hits Iraq, and sparks...

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In Dhi Qar, a province south of Baghdad, the cuts have hit public hospitals, said provincial health chief Abdel Hassan Al-Jaberi. "People are hesitating to come to the hospital because the electricity is cutting 17 times per day," he told AFP. Private clinics purchase their own generators to keep machines running during the outages, but these remain unaffordable for many of Iraq's 40 million citizens. Some people are buying fewer groceries, fearing they'll spoil if it's too hot and the power goes out.

"Everyone is buying less," said Abu Haydar, a shopkeeper in Nasiriyah, Dhi Qar's largest city. Like most residents, he gets up to 12 hours of state-provided electricity per day and supplements them by paying for a generator so his wares don't go bad. Further south in the oil-rich province of Basra, the heat has reached life-threatening levels. Oil companies have hoisted purple flags above their facilities to signal the highest possible danger levels for those working on the fields given the heat wave.

Even Iraq's football league has been forced to make adjustments for its national championship, which falls dur-

ing the summer months. There are dozens of outdoor arenas, but only five of them have the floodlights necessary for nighttime games and athletes are forced to play during the day. That puts them at risk of dehydration, heatstroke and other conditions, says sports nutritionist and football coach Lotfi Moussawi.

"The players suffer from hypoglycemia, breathing problems, and extreme fatigue that could even reach the point of fainting," Moussawi told AFP. To mitigate the risks, referees pause matches every 15 minutes to allow players a sip of water and a few moments in the shade. "Players then undergo medical and physical examinations" to make sure the heat has not left any adverse after-effects, says Khayam Al-Khazarji. Khazarji is the communications head for Al-Kahraba, one of Iraq's several dozen football clubs, many of which are linked to government bodies.

"Al-Kahraba," ironically, means "electricity" - a club named after its patron, Iraq's strapped power ministry. The ministry is in the public's crosshairs every summer due to outages, which occur year-round but are more common and damaging during the hot months. The United States has granted Iraq another 90-day waiver to continue with vital energy imports from neighboring Iran despite re-imposed sanctions, a government source said Saturday. The extension came after "long discussions" with Washington ahead of a looming deadline on a previous extension granted in December, the official, close to the negotiations, told AFP. — AFP

Bashir charged with corruption...

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fatigues on June 3, according to witnesses. More than 100 people were killed that day in Khartoum, according to doctors linked to the protest movement, while the health ministry put the nationwide death toll at 61. Protesters and witnesses accuse the feared paramilitary group led by Dagalo, the Rapid Support Forces, of carrying out the assault on demonstrators. Demonstrators and US officials have called for an independent probe into the crackdown.

On Thursday, military council spokesman General Shamseddine Kabbashi expressed "regret" over the crackdown. But the council insists it did not order the dispersal, saying it had actually planned to purge an area near the protest camp where people are said to sell drugs. "The planning of the operation of Colombia (area) was done by military and security authorities," the council said in a statement late Saturday. "We assure you that

the council is keen to investigate minute by minute facts through its investigation committee."

Brigadier Abderrahim Badreddine, spokesman for the investigative committee, told state television Saturday initial findings indicate that "officers and soldiers of different ranks and regular forces" had entered the sit-in without any orders from their superiors. As calls for an independent probe grew, Arab League chief Ahmed Aboul Gheit visited Khartoum yesterday, where the military council said he met its chief General Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan.

Bashir had swept to power in an Islamist-backed coup in 1989. Sudan suffered high rates of corruption during his rule, ranking 172 out of 180 countries in Transparency International's 2018 Corruption Perceptions Index. When he imposed a state of emergency on February 22 in a bid to quell protests that erupted in December over the spiralling costs, Bashir issued a decree making it illegal to possess more than \$5,000 in foreign currency. But in April, military council chief Burhan said more than \$113 million worth of cash in three currencies had been seized from Bashir's residence after he was toppled. A team of police, army and security agents found seven million euros (\$7.8 million), \$350,000 and five billion Sudanese pounds (\$105 million). — AFP

Riyadh blames Iran for tanker attacks...

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The United States is going to make sure that we take all the actions necessary, diplomatic and otherwise, that achieve that outcome," Pompeo said. "We don't want a war. We've done what we can to deter this," Pompeo said. "The Iranians should understand very clearly that we will continue to take actions that deter Iran from engaging in this ... kind of behavior."

The secretary would not lay out US evidence for Iran's involvement in the Gulf of Oman explosions, but insisted: "It's unmistakable what happened here. These were attacks by the Islamic Republic of Iran on commercial shipping, on the freedom of navigation, with the clear intent to deny transit through the strait." Some allies, skeptical of US intentions, have said they wanted to see more evidence before reaching a conclusion. "I will concede that there are countries that wish this would just go away," Pompeo said. He expressed confidence that "as we continue to develop the fact pattern, countries around the world will not only accept the basic facts, which I think are indisputable, but will come to understand that this is an important mission for the world."

Earlier yesterday, Iran's parliament speaker said that Washington could have been behind the "suspicious" tanker attacks, the official news agency IRNA reported. "The suspicious actions against the tankers... seem to complement the economic sanctions against Iran considering that (the US) has not achieved any results from them," Ali Larijani told MPs. He backed his claim by saying there had been a precedent "during World War II, when Americans targeted their own ships near Japan to create an excuse for hostility". A non-belligerent state at the beginning of World War II, the US went to war after Japan's surprise attack on the American Pearl Harbor base in Hawaii on the morning of Dec 7, 1941.

Poll: Trump trailing Biden...

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and Wisconsin. Trump's campaign recently dismissed leaked data from its own pollsters showing Biden with double-digit leads in battleground states. The campaign at first denied the data, but then acknowledged it, branding it as "ancient" because it dated from March.

But the new CBS poll confirms a clear Biden lead in battleground states among Democratic voters, as the crowded race for that party's nomination begins to take shape. A belief among Democratic voters that Biden is best positioned to defeat Trump in 2020 was cited by three-quarters of Democrats as a decisive factor in their support.

The CBS News/YouGov Battleground Tracker survey, conducted May 31 to June 12, said Biden had the backing of 31 percent of Democratic primary voters in 18 key early-voting states. Biden was trailed by senators Elizabeth Warren (17 percent), Sanders (16 percent) and Kamala Harris (10 percent). The poll, with a 1.5 percent margin of error, looked at states including Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina - which hold primary elections in February, at the top

of the electoral calendar - as well as states in the upper Midwest, where Trump eked out narrow but decisive victories in 2016.

Elizabeth Warren has been steadily rising in the polls, only recently reaching statistical equivalency with Sanders, whose support has been slipping. Sanders acknowledged on Sunday that "polls go up and polls go down" but insisted that the survey showed he was the strongest candidate to defeat Trump. "I think we can win in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Michigan and some of the other battleground states," the self-styled democratic socialist said on "Fox News Sunday".

Democrats begin more earnestly winnowing down their field of nearly two dozen candidates when they hold successive nights of televised debates on June 26 and 27. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the 29-year-old New Yorker who has emerged as a heroine to young progressives, suggested Sunday that Democrats could be in trouble in 2020 if they fail to nominate an energizing candidate with working-class appeal.

She said she would support the 76-year-old Biden if he wins the nomination but added on ABC that "we have to really factor in the enthusiasm of voters ... an issue that we had in 2016". "We need to pick a candidate that's going to be exciting to vote for - all people, women, people of all genders, races, income levels." But the Fox poll found that Democratic voters, by roughly three-to-one, wanted a nominee who would provide "steady, reliable leadership" rather than a "bold new agenda". — AFP