



PHOTO: AFP

People sit outside the Renaissance Hotel during the East Coast blackout Friday in New York City.

Big blackout points finger to US vulnerability

REUTERS, San Francisco

The vulnerability of the North American electric system was highlighted on Thursday and Friday as millions in North America lost their power on one of the hottest afternoons of the summer.

Industry officials have long warned that the North American power transmission system, which saw its greatest expansion in the years following World War II, is groaning under the weight of the heavy loads it carries today.

"We're a superpower with a third-world grid. We need a new grid," New Mexico Gov. and former Energy Secretary Bill Richardson told the CNN television network. "The problem is that nobody is building enough transmission capacity."

According to the Electric Power Research Institute in Palo Alto,

California, US power demand has surged 30 percent in the last decade, while transmission capacity grew a mere 15 per cent.

And during muggy weather like the kind blanketing the Northeast on Thursday, air conditioning accounts for a hefty 30 per cent of all power flowing over the lines, severely taxing an already over-worked transmission network.

It was the biggest blackout in North American history, according to US power grid operators. It eclipsed the 1965 blackout in the United States and Canada that affected about 30 million people.

It spread in a matter of seconds, tripping circuit breakers from the Great Lakes to New England to protect costly electrical equipment from a sudden voltage jolt.

Power was returning to some

of the affected areas. By early (on) Friday, power had been restored to New York's Bronx borough and suburban Westchester County, TV networks reported.

The blackout was reminiscent of the infamous 1965 outage, triggered by a lightning strike on a high-voltage line running from Canada to New York, stranding about 30 million people without electricity along the populous New York-New England corridor.

The 1965 outage shocked the nation and gave birth to the North American Electric Reliability Council, a New Jersey-based industry group that works to ensure reliable service on the 500,000-mile network of high-voltage lines that serve 270 million US and 31 million Canadian customers.



Monica Ali on Booker Prize list

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, London

Monica Ali, who was singled out as one of Britain's best young authors even before her first work was published, leads the charge of young writers with her novel Brick Lane, on this year's Booker Prize list, the 34th since its inception.

Her book that narrates the story of a Bangladeshi girl sent to London to be married is one of the 23 titles chosen from 117 entries in contention for the £50,000 prize. With her father from Bangladesh and mother an Englishwoman, Monica Ali addresses the themes of ethnicity and identity in her novel. She has also struggled to stop critics categorising her by her ethnic background.

She is among a couple of good younger female novelists in the list such as Zoe Heller, Julie Myerson and Julia Darling.

The bookmakers got busy almost immediately. Bookmakers Ladbrokes chose the South African author JM Coetzee, the two-time Booker winner, as the 4-1 favourite with his novel Elizabeth Costello. There are two other previous Booker winners in the list, Margaret Atwood, winner three years ago with The Blind Assassin and Graham Swift. The two are joint favourites at 8-1. Monica Ali is 14-1 favourite, at present.

The 35-year-old Oxford graduate, Monica Ali's, choice is seen as a vindication.

Libya officially accepts Lockerbie blame

Britain to table resolution for UN sanctions lifting, US to keep ban but won't oppose waiver

AP, AFP, Washington

The Bush administration will keep a US diplomatic and economic squeeze on Libya despite the country's acceptance of responsibility for the bombing of a Pan Am jetliner over Scotland in 1988.

Libya officially accepted responsibility in a letter delivered Friday to the Syrian ambassador to the United Nations, Mikhail Wehbe. The letter was part of a \$2.7 billion settlement with the families of the 270 people killed in the bombing, most of them Americans.

Each of the families is likely to receive at least \$5 million and could receive \$10 million from the \$2.7 billion fund that Libya will deposit next week in a Swiss bank.

In a joint letter delivered to the Syrian ambassador, whose government currently holds the presidency of the UN Security Council, the United States and Britain said they were "prepared to allow the lifting" of UN sanctions imposed in 1991 once

Libya deposited the compensation into an escrow account.

However, a US official said the United States would probably abstain rather than vote for the resolution, would maintain US sanctions against Libya, and had no plan to remove Libya from the State Department's list of countries that sponsor terrorism.

White House spokesman Scott McClellan said, "The Libyan regime's behaviour - including its poor human rights record and lack of democratic institutions, its destructive role in perpetuating regional conflicts in Africa and its continued and worrisome pursuit of weapons of mass destruction and their related delivery systems - remains a cause for serious concern."

The United States will intensify its efforts to end "threatening elements" of Libya's behaviour and US sanctions on Libya will remain in full force until Libya addresses these concerns, McClellan said in a state-

ment.

Secretary of State Colin Powell, in a statement, said "combating the evil of terrorism remains a paramount commitment of the United States. We will not relent in that continuing struggle."

Libyan Ambassador Ahmed A. Own wrote in behalf of his government that Libya has helped bring to judgement two suspects in the bombing and "accepts responsibility for the actions of its officials."

Libya "is committed to be cooperative in the international fight against terrorism," the letter said. "It is also committed to cooperate with efforts to bring those who are suspects to judgement."

Britain's ambassador to the United Nations, Emyr Jones Parry, said the Libyan letter "set out very clearly" that Libya has met the conditions for lifting UN sanctions and that the United States agreed.

On Capitol Hill, Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass., said Libya's acceptance of responsibility for the

bombing was a major victory for the United States and the families of the victims.

AFP adds: Britain said Saturday it would "shortly" table a draft security council resolution to lift UN sanctions against Libya after Tripoli formally accepted responsibility for the 1988 bombing of a Pan Am jet over the Scottish town of Lockerbie.

Junior Foreign Office Minister Denis MacShane said in a statement: "Libya has accepted responsibility for that outrage. At the same time it has agreed to pay substantial compensation to the relatives of those who were murdered."

"It has renounced terrorism and has agreed to co-operate with any further Lockerbie investigation."

The White House said the United States would not oppose the lifting of sanctions. But it still has concerns about Moamer Kadhafi's administration in Libya and a dispute with France, which has threatened to block the resolution, must also be settled to get the resolution passed.

Palestinians hail deal on WB pullouts

Israel speaks of conditions

AFP, Jerusalem

The Palestinians Friday hailed what they said was a pledge by Israel to withdraw from four more West Bank towns even though Israeli media reported a raft of conditions attached to the second phase of the promised redeployment.

The announcement of the breakthrough came after a second round of talks in 24 hours between Palestinian security chief Mohammed Dahlan and Israeli Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz.

"At the meeting between Dahlan and Mofaz, it was agreed that Israel will withdraw from four Palestinian cities in the next two weeks," Dahlan spokesman Elias Zanani told AFP, naming the cities as Jericho, Ramallah, Qalqilya and Tulkarem. No Israeli officials were immediately available to confirm the pull-back pledge, which came after Mofaz had refused to offer more than a single redeployment from the small towns of Jericho and Qalqilya two weeks ago.

But a report on Israeli public radio said that, while Israel would transfer control of Jericho and Qalqilya next week, it would hand over Ramallah and Tulkarem only if the Palestinians met certain conditions.

These were an end to anti-Israeli attacks and demands that the Palestinians draw up a detailed plan on fighting "terror", and deal with the complex issue of individuals wanted by Israel, the radio said without elaborating.

Army radio meanwhile said that Dahlan had undertaken to collect weapons from Palestinian militant groups and identify their sources of funding.

But he did not commit himself to breaking up "terror infrastructure", as demanded repeatedly by Israel and the United States, the radio said.

The apparent compromise came after Dahlan met Washington's chief Middle East peace monitor, John Wolf, earlier Friday to urge more Israeli action to build confidence on

the ground. The Palestinian leadership insists it cannot meet Israeli demands to take on the militant groups while its army remains in occupation of Palestinian towns.

It was the latest in a string of Israeli gestures to the Palestinians during the day as the two sides sought to prevent a resurgence of violence from overwhelming a seven-week-old truce by Palestinian militants which had resulted in a sharp fall in casualties on both sides.

Israeli also freed scores of Palestinian prisoners whose release had been delayed, lifted restrictions imposed on the West Bank town of Bethlehem and cleared the reopening of two closed colleges in the flashpoint city of Hebron.

Israeli officials said they were also considering lifting briefly a 19-month-old siege on Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's West Bank base in Ramallah so he could join the mourning for his late sister in the Gaza Strip, although there was no word of any decision after the evening's talks.

The moves came amid mounting fears of a new spiral of bloodshed after a local commander of the radical group Islamic Jihad was killed Thursday by Israeli forces in Hebron.

Islamic Jihad vowed to avenge the death, which came just two days after two Palestinian suicide bombings killed two Israelis in reprisal for a bloody Israeli army raid last Friday on the northern West Bank city of Nablus.

The round of attacks threatened a precarious three-month truce declared by Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other Palestinian militant groups on June 29.

On Friday, the leading Cairo daily Al-Ahram reported that Egypt, which was instrumental in convincing the Palestinian factions to cease fire, was sending a high-ranking delegation to the territories to shore up the truce.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian people gather in the Howrah station in Kolkata yesterday to watch the "Heritage Train" during the celebrations of the 150th anniversary of the railways in eastern India. The Heritage Train made a 38 km trip following the same route of its first journey 150 years ago on August 15, 1853.

No-confidence motion

Vajpayee plots strategy

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee yesterday held a strategy session with leaders of ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA) constituents to face the opposition-sponsored no-confidence motion which will be taken up in Lok Sabha, lower house of Parliament, on Monday.

Vajpayee earned support from government coalition allies Saturday who pledged to help defeat a no-confidence motion in parliament next week, a minister said.

Besides ruling coalition partners, the session was attended also by regional parties which are supporting the 24-party coalition government headed by Vajpayee.

The meeting came a day after

Vajpayee held informal consultations with his Deputy L K Advani, BJP chief M Venkaiah Naidu and NDA convenor and Defence Minister George Fernandez last night to cope with the trial of strength, the first to be faced by the government since coming to power in October 1999.

Emerging from the hour-long meeting last night, Parliamentary Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj told reporters that the NDA might seek the support of non-NDA party AIADMK, the ruling party in the southern state of Tamil Nadu headed by Jayaram Jayalalitha to face the no-trust motion.

The AIADMK has 11 members in Lok Sabha and the regional party has for the last several months been warming up to BJP by supporting ideological issues of the saffron party like law against conversion

and uniform civil code. Though the arithmetic in Lok Sabha is clearly in favor of Vajpayee government, the ruling alliance apparently does not want to leave anything to chance and eleventh-hour anxieties.

The NDA's strength stands around 325 in the 543-member Lok Sabha as against 212 for the opposition. On its own, the BJP, lead partner of NDA, has 183 members against 109 of Congress, the main opposition.

As part of the efforts to cement the cohesiveness in NDA, Vajpayee will address the members of Lok Sabha belonging to the alliance as also those belonging to the parties supporting it from outside on Monday when the two-day debate on the no-confidence motion brought by Leader of the Opposition Sonia Gandhi begins.



PHOTO: AFP

A demonstrator holds a sign referencing France's position on the Iraqi war during a protest against US President George W. Bush's administration near the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Irvine California Friday. President Bush is visiting southern California to raise money for his campaign.

'Key British claim on Iraq weapons was hearsay'

AFP, London

Britain's headline-grabbing claim before the Iraq war that Baghdad could deploy weapons of mass destruction within 45 minutes was based on second-hand information, the Guardian reported Saturday.

The left-wing daily said the revelation that the 45-minute assertion was hearsay was contained in an internal Foreign Office document released to a judicial inquiry probing the suspected suicide of a government arms expert at the centre of a row of how Britain went to war.

Senior judge Lord Hutton is leading an investigation probing the circumstances leading up to the death of scientist David Kelly, a former UN weapons inspector in Iraq.

Hotly denied claims from the BBC that London "sexed up" an official dossier last September on Iraq's weapons arsenal to bolster the case for war in March, together with the suspected suicide of Kelly -- the likely source of the report -- have triggered a major political crisis for Prime Minister Tony Blair.

BBC reporter Andrew Gilligan reported that Blair's office was responsible for inserting in the Iraq dossier the claim that Saddam

Hussein could launch weapons of mass destruction within 45 minutes.

That assertion "came from a reliable and established source, quoting a well placed senior officer" in the Iraqi army, the Foreign Office document was cited by the Guardian as saying.

The paper added that the government has never before admitted that such key information was based on hearsay.

Menzies Campbell, foreign affairs spokesman for the opposition Liberal Democrats, told the Guardian that the revelation damaged the government's credibility, adding: "It provides an even thinner justification to go to war."

Hutton's inquiry in London heard earlier this week that Kelly had told a BBC journalist the government had over-played the claim that it had evidence Iraq could deploy chemical or biological weapons in as little as 45 minutes.

"It was a statement that was made and it just got out of all proportion. They were desperate for information which could be used," Kelly told Susan Watts, the science editor of BBC television's Newsnight programme.