



He is in pain and in a suffocating environment at a dark and gloomy ward, inset, in Dhaka Medical College Hospital during the blackout yesterday. The fan above his head is still and his relatives try to comfort him, one with a worn out hand fan made out of a palm leaf. Helps at a CNG filling station in Moghbazar, top right, sit around and chat as the station closed having no power. A dark Sonargaon intersection with no streetlights, bottom right, but partially illuminated by headlights.



PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON/PALASH KHAN

Without power for 10 hours

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The power import from India began in October 2013 through the 400-kilovolt transmission line, running from Baharampur in West Bengal to Bangladesh's Bheramara.

The trouble started with a circuit failure in the Bheramara plant around 11:30am, said a senior official of Power Development Board.

"This sudden collapse of interconnection created imbalance in the national grid, which is linked to all power plants of the country."

The sudden vacuum in the national grid caused disruption to production at Ashuganj Power Station and other plants in the country. All of them stopped operation at once.

Later, the India-Bangladesh interconnection line was separated from the national grid for repairs.

After several failed attempts to restart the plants, supply could be

restored last night.

Around 9:30pm, Masum-Al-Beruni, managing director of Power Grid Company of Bangladesh (PGCB), said electricity was back in parts of the capital's Gulshan, Banani, Uttara and Motijheel and Mirpur.

The supply resumed partially in Chittagong, Rajshahi and Sylhet and restoring power in Khulna will begin soon. "We hope that this time there will not be any further disruption," he told The Daily Star over the phone.

Power generation was 1,800MW as of 9:15pm against the demand for more than 6,000MW. "The generation is increasing gradually," said Beruni.

Saleha Akter, a resident of Mohammadpur, told this correspondent that electricity was back to her house around 9:00pm.

Contacted around 1:30am today,

Nasiruddin, an official of Dhaka Power Distribution Company (DPDC) control room, said the supply resumed almost everywhere in Dhaka city by around 1:00am.

Tawfiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury, energy adviser to the prime minister, said the supply will be normal by this afternoon.

A senior official of the state-owned Power Grid Corporation of India Ltd (PGCIL), which manages the electricity transmission line between the two countries, said there is absolutely no problem on their side.

Power Grid's Executive Director (Operations) RP Sasmal told reporters that a problem of the Bangladesh substation has caused non-drawal of power from India, reported our new Delhi correspondent.

In Dhaka, a seven-member committee has been formed to probe the power outage. The committee, led by

BIGGEST BLACKOUTS ACROSS GLOBE

BRAZIL-PARAGUAY, NOVEMBER 10-11, 2009
Heavy rain caused transmission short circuit affecting 6 crore people in the two countries.

US-CANADA, AUGUST 14-15, 2003
A software bug triggered a power outage in parts of the US and Canada affecting 5.5 crore people.

ITALY, SEPTEMBER 28, 2003
Storm caused power transmission failure affecting 5.5 crore people.

Additional Secretary Ahmed Kaikas, has been asked to submit a report by three days.

Meanwhile, in the social media, many expressed disappointments at the country's power management.

In a Facebook post, Khondkar Saleque, a Bangladeshi energy expert working for the mining ministry of Afghanistan, said, "It is silly not to have contingency arrangements in power grid to avoid cyclic impacts from an incident which happened today in national power grid."

"For a 450MW power transmission loss from India, power generation plants must not have gone out of production. There are technologies to cater for such glitches," he wrote.

Life came to a standstill with collapse of the national power system, which lights up more than 60 percent of households.

Industrial production and businesses, big and small alike, were also hit hard with shopping malls and

markets had to close their shutters.

Asif Ibrahim, a leading apparel exporter, said production was almost halved due to the power cut, as the backup generators could not run the factories without any break.

The situation was same at almost all factories in the industrial hubs in Dhaka and Chittagong.

Electricity supply was not available at the Bangabhaban and the Gono Bhaban.

The last time the country experienced a total blackout was in December 2007.

Since the Awami League-led grand alliance took office winning the 2008 election, the power sector has been given the highest priority.

There are more than a hundred power plants across the country. Together with imported power from India, these plants can pump up to 7,400MW electricity.

Disaster averted

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apparently without a major disaster as electricity was restored there by 10:00pm.

Earlier, almost all public hospitals had to do without diagnostic equipment throughout the 10-hour blackout. Many patients with head injuries were seen queuing up in front of radiology and imaging department at Dhaka Medical College Hospital for CT scans late in the afternoon. Some of them had been waiting there for up to three hours.

Water supply was also disrupted in major city hospitals. Patients' attendants were seen standing in a line for water at many hospitals.

At DMCH, dialysis could not be administered due to water crisis. Besides, food for over 3,000 patients there could not be prepared in time.

Candles were lit but as the supplies ran out, many were seen using torches in mobile phones. Patients at different wards suffered as the electric fans could not be turned on.

Rehana Begum, sister of a patient at the Chittagong Medical College Hospital (CMCH), said pathological tests of her brother could not be done due to the blackout.

Bidhan Chandra Sengupta, in-charge, Clinical Pathology, CMCH, said they could not do any test after 2:00pm with samples piling up.

CMCH Director Brig Gen Khondakar Shahidul Ghani said power was supplied to the key wards and the ICU, CCU and the operation theatres by generators.

Over 1,500 patients at the Rajshahi Medical College and Hospital (RMCH) underwent similar ordeals.

RMCH Director Brig Gen Nasir Uddin said three generators of the hospital ran on alternate hours, as the machines had to be shut down every

hour for refuelling and cooling.

"We are concerned that the machines may go out of order due to increased load," he said.

In Barisal, emergency operations at hospitals were done using candle light, informed Dr Kamrul Hasan Selim, director of Sher-e-Bangla Medical College and Hospital.

People in the capital also suffered immensely. Many were seen rushing to nearby shops to get bottled water. But increased demand soon left the shops out of water too.

"I did not know what to feed my children as my taps ran dry. I had to rush to a shop," said Jhumur, 32, a housewife in a neighbourhood in the capital.

Businesses started shutting down as their generators overheated. Ananta Group, a major garment manufacturing company in the capital, had to switch on its massive generators to keep eight of its units running, costing the company an additional Tk 5-6 lakh.

Employees of different factories ran from one petrol station to another looking for diesel.

Mohammad Zafar, manager of Shahjahan Enterprises Ltd, the gas station near the capital's Ruposhi Bangla Hotel, said he had to run the station using a generator the whole day.

"But if we run a generator for an hour, we need to keep it shut for half an hour to allow it to cool down. So we lost some customers but what is more worrying is running the station with diesel-run generators, which would increase our cost," he said.

Swapan Kanti Chakraborty, chief engineer of Chattagram Bidyut Kendro, said all the five power production centres of Chittagong were stopped as soon as the national grid

failed.

Production in four units of Kaptai Hydro Electric Centre resumed at around 4:30pm, he said, adding that generation in the rest of the centres would also resume soon.

Mahbulul Alam, president of Chittagong Chamber of Commerce and Industry, said production in the industries was hampered due to the power failure.

Both print and electronic media outlets suffered tremendously as reporters found it difficult to send news items to head offices. Publication of local newspapers was also hampered.

The TV stations faced crisis of gas and fuel. They deployed their teams at different points of the capital, fearing deterioration of law and order and rise in crimes.

Although television stations ran programmes and news, the countrymen could not watch them. Even so, all the programmes and news bulletins ran on schedule for viewers outside the country.

Major airports, including the Shahjalal International Airport, faced no problem as they have their own power-supply systems. However, authorities shut down many air conditioners and less important establishments to save power.

Jail authorities put all the 68 prisons on high alert as those remained in dark for hours without any generator service.

"We are using lanterns and torches at all the jails," Inspector General (Prisons) Brig Gen Iftekhar Uddin told The Daily Star.

Security was beefed up all over the country with deployment of law enforcers at the key-point installations and other government and private establishments.

Date with darkness

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buses on the streets till midnight, this weekend was different.

Only a handful of cars could be seen on the roads and a public bus was a rare sight. Footpaths were mostly empty. No vendors and hardly any pedestrian could be found on the pavements.

Several hundred people were found waiting at Trust Filling Station near Bijoy Sarani intersection when this correspondent went there around 10:00pm. They all were waiting with containers and jars in hand to buy diesel. As most pumps were facing disruptions to their operation due to the outage, people, some of whom had come in rickshaw-vans with big containers, picked this refuelling station, run by the Army Welfare Trust, to buy fuel for generators.

Banani-11, a well-known hangout spot that springs to life with the sunset, was found quiet around 10:00pm. Almost all the fast-food shops were closed and hardly any cars or people could be seen in the otherwise busy area.

The impacts of hours-long outage on the city life were reflected in the social media as well.

"I have an exam tomorrow. My laptop has run out of charge. I'm using my brother's phone to go through study materials. Do I have to carry candles to the exam hall tomorrow?" a Nabila posted on The Daily Star's Facebook page.

Seventy-five-year-old Ziaul Huda even went as far as to question the scientific advancement.

"I wonder if we had a better life in our young age when we used to depend on kerosene lights and hand fans only," he posted on the Facebook page.

Private university student Jasim Uddin perhaps summed it up the best. "Life is dark without electricity," he told The Daily Star over the phone last evening.

Down digitally

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However, the core equipment and data centres of the carriers were safe, the official said.

Sayed Talat Kamal, head of external communications of Grameenphone, yesterday night said their network in some parts of the country could suffer disruptions if power outage continued.

"We have been running our operations on secondary generators and backup batteries since 11:30am," he said.

Robi, another leading carrier, said less than 5 percent of its network was experiencing outage and its teams were working to have it sorted out.

Faisal Hyder, chief executive officer of Qubee, a WiMax internet service provider, said they were forced to shut down a number of base stations as their battery backups ran out.

Almas Kabir, senior vice-president of Internet Service Providers Association of Bangladesh, said the small ISPs suffered the most as they usually do not have backups.

Kabir, also the CEO of Metrolink, a data service provider, said they had to shut down their services at a number of areas as mobile phones carriers who support them with infrastructure had their own network offline.

Superstores in the capital were also affected by the power failure.

Meena Bazar, a chain store, had to spend an additional Tk 40,000 an hour for running generators to preserve perishable items on the shelf, said its Chief Operating Officer Shaheen Khan.

Meena Bazar, which runs 18 outlets in three divisional cities, had to shut four outlets in the capital by 7:00pm, he said. Rahimafrooz Superstores Ltd that operates Agora also bore additional costs for running generators.

"We will have to spend an additional Tk 520,000 for all our 13 outlets if elec-

tricity supply is not restored by tomorrow morning," said Habibur Islam, area manager of Rahimafrooz Superstores.

Superstores have to keep generators running especially to preserve perishable items such as meat, fish and dairy products, said Md Zakir Hossain, general secretary of Bangladesh Supermarket Owners' Association.

He said the superstores would have to suffer significant losses if electricity supply was not restored by yesterday night.

Most of the 5,500 ATMs across the country became inoperative four to five hours after the power outage, causing sufferings to many ATM users.

Abdus Sobhan, security guard at Jamuna Bank's ATM booth at Lalbagh, said, "The electricity backup to run the ATMs exhausted around four hours after the electricity outage in the morning. Since then, I told all clients that the ATM machine had stopped working."

Some 20 to 25 people had returned empty handed since late afternoon, Sobhan said in the evening.

Bankers, who look after the ATM network, said except for those with generators, most ATMs were shut since the late afternoon due to exhaustion of uninterruptible power supply (UPS) backup.

Bankers said ATMs see a rise in the number of clients at the beginning of every month, as many draw their monthly salaries at this time.

"Our UPS provides power backup for four hours. Our ATMs were on for that time since the power outage. Now almost all our ATMs are inoperative," Abul Kashem Mohammad Shirin, deputy managing director of the DBBL, told The Daily Star in the evening.

With 2,700 ATM booths, the DBBL has the largest ATM network in the country.

At peace, finally

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living in a rented house at Dokkhin Bokterpur of Savar.

"We did not have to pay any doctors at hospitals. We just needed to buy the medicine which was expensive," said Rana.

Rasel Rana said she took treatment

at different hospitals including the Combined Military Hospital, Gonoshastho Kendra Hospital at Nabinagar, General Hospital in Savar and Dhaka Medical College and Hospital for different durations in the past 18 months.

At last she was admitted at the

DMCH in June and was released from there in the middle of last month although her condition was worsening.

"Doctors requested us not to take her home as she needed an operation. But we could afford neither an operation nor the expenses required to main-

tain her attendants," said Shaheda, explaining why they took her home against doctors' instructions.

Zaheda left behind her seven-year-old daughter Lima Akter and husband Rezaul Karim, 32, a day labourer.

The multi-storey Rana Plaza which housed at least five garment factories, a

private bank and a market collapsed on April 24, 2013. At least 1,136 people were killed and scores maimed and badly injured in the incident.

Rana Plaza owner Sohel Rana and owners of the garment factories had forced the staffs and workers of the factories to work inside the building

even after cracks were found in the building, according to a probe by the Criminal Investigation Department which is in its final stage.

The deadly collapse shook the whole world and brought the question of Bangladeshi workers' safety and rights at garment factories to the fore-