

CLIMATE CHANGE

Bangladesh blackouts magnify heat wave linked to climate change

Forex shortage further reduces electricity generation, frustrating residents



A man drinks lemonade from a street vendor during a heat wave compounded by power cuts in Dhaka on June 6. © Reuters

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DHAKA -- Bangladesh's tight finances and worsening power shortages have exacerbated the effects of a heat wave that swept South and Southeast Asia in recent weeks, highlighting anew how some of the countries hardest hit by climate change are also the least equipped to deal with it.

Mild to moderate rainfall brought relief to parts of Bangladesh on Thursday as a monsoon advanced toward the coast. But the country has faced what officials said was the longest June hot spell in 44 years, after crippling heat over the past two months. Some districts recently logged temperatures around 41 C.

Ensuring a stable supply of electricity remains a critical challenge. Yet earlier this week, Bangladesh was forced to shut down its Payra Power Plant, which used to contribute 1,320 megawatts of electricity. Coal suppliers have refused to keep providing fuel due to nonpayment of import bills as Dhaka strains to avoid a full-fledged foreign exchange crisis. It is uncertain when the plant will be back online.

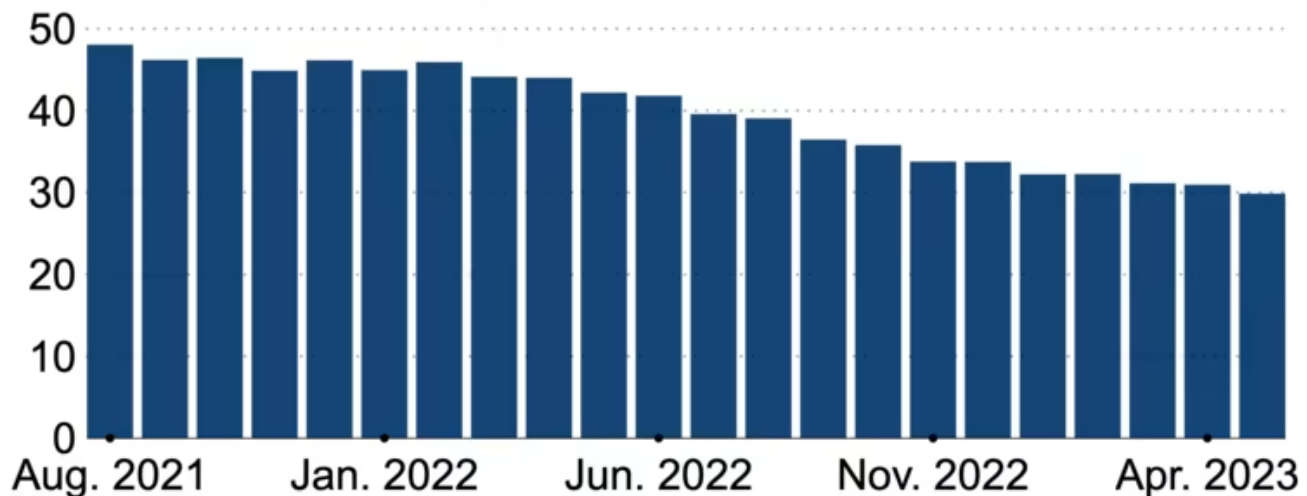
It was only in February last year that Bangladesh celebrated reaching its target for electricity production. The achievement proved short-lived, as inflationary pressures from the Ukraine war buffeted the country alongside even more cash-strapped South Asian neighbors Sri Lanka and Pakistan.

Although Bangladesh secured a \$4.7 billion **loan agreement from the International Monetary Fund** in January, its official forex reserves dipped below \$30 billion last month, down from a high of \$48 billion in August 2021.

Now, the government in Dhaka -- which faces an election in early 2024 -- is asking for patience. Nasrul Hamid, the state minister for power, energy and mineral resources, told parliament on Tuesday that the daily electricity deficit was now 2,500 MW.

Bangladesh's shrinking forex reserves

(Official gross reserves, in billions of dollars)



Source: Bangladesh Bank

Rural areas have been experiencing around 10 hours of "load shedding" -- cutting power to ease the stress on the system -- almost every day. Shabana Akter, a homemaker from a village in Mymensingh, said: "We hardly get electricity. My 1-year-old son kept sweating and couldn't sleep in this extreme temperature. He has been coughing and caught a fever now."

Residents of the capital are also frustrated with power outages at varying times of the day and night.

Shahabuddin, who lives in Dhaka, said he was annoyed by the "erratic behavior of electricity" lately. "I used to follow the load-shedding schedule in the first few days, but now I lost my trail. I can't figure out the exact timing and duration," he said.

This has made coping with high temperatures all the more difficult. Extreme heat has been blamed for the death of at least one student in the southwest, according to reports, although experts say the full toll tends to only become apparent weeks or months later, and heat-related deaths are not always reliably recorded.

For safety, Bangladesh's government closed elementary schools nationwide from Monday, and also shuttered secondary schools on Thursday.

Nazmul Islam Munna, head of the the health directorate's disease control department and spokesperson for the organization, said the heat compounds other public health challenges. "Patients of diarrheal diseases, dengue, cough and fever crowded the health facilities this summer," he said. "Water sources have been dried, and many people don't have access to clean water. So, waterborne diseases spread."

April and May are generally the hottest months in South and Southeast Asia. But environmentalists have been linking this year's intense temperatures to climate change.

Saleemul Haque, a climate scientist and director of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development, told a local TV channel in Dhaka, "We have long been talking about the impact of climate change in the future; the change has now hit."



A shopkeeper sits idle during a blackout amid stifling heat in Dhaka on June 6. © Reuters

World Weather Attribution, an initiative that brings together researchers from around the world to study the impact of global warming, issued a report in mid-May that said extreme heat this year in parts of Bangladesh, India, Thailand and Laos was "largely driven" by climate change. The study suggested that human-induced climate change made such heat waves 30 times more likely. "At the same time, a heat wave with a chance of occurrence of 20% (1 in 5 years) in any given year over India and Bangladesh is now about 2 C hotter in heat index than it would be in a climate not warmed by human activities," the report said.

The same initiative last year [linked the devastating floods in Pakistan](#) to global warming -- a disaster that spurred calls for [climate reparations](#).

For the average Bangladeshi, the heat and power shortages add to the pain of high inflation, which was approaching 10% in May according to the central bank.

B.M. Shaheen, a building caretaker in Dhaka's Panthapath area, said homeowners or renters have to pay extra to cover the cost of gallons of diesel to keep generators running. He said that a few years ago, he "hardly bought" diesel. "The load-shedding problem was almost gone," he recalled.

Prices of rechargeable fans have also risen. At one market, fans with 12-inch blades were selling for 4,500 taka (\$41), up from 2,800 taka before the latest heat wave.

Even the cost of green coconut -- a favorite summertime refreshment -- has jumped.