

# ‘We’ve returned to the Middle Ages’ - life in Venezuela’s blackout

For Venezuelans today, suffering under a new nationwide black-out that has lasted days, it’s like being thrown back to life centuries ago.



A man sits on a bench in pitch dark, during a power cut in Caracas. *Foto: Cristian Hernández / AFP*

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Walking for hours, making oil lamps, bearing water. For Venezuelans today, suffering under a new nationwide black-out that has lasted days, it’s like being thrown back to life centuries ago.

El Ávila, a mountain that towers over Caracas, has become a place where families gather with buckets and jugs to fill up with water, wash dishes and scrub clothes. The taps in their homes are dry from lack of electricity to the city’s water pumps.

“We’re forced to get water from sources that obviously aren’t completely

hygienic. But it's enough for washing or doing the dishes," said one resident, Manuel Almeida.

Because of the long lines of people, the activity can take hours of waiting.

Elsewhere, locals make use of cracked water pipes. But they still need to boil the water, or otherwise purify it.

"We're going to bed without washing ourselves," said one man, Pedro Jose, a 30-year-old living in a poorer neighbourhood in the west of the capital.

Some shops seeing an opportunity have hiked the prices of bottles of water and bags of ice to between US\$3 and US\$5 - a fortune in a country where the monthly minimum salary is the equivalent of US\$5.50.

Better-off Venezuelans, those with access to US dollars, have rushed to fill hotels that have giant generators and working restaurants.

For others, preserving fresh food is a challenge. Finding it is even more difficult. The blackout has forced most shops to close.

"We share food" among family members and friends, explained Coral Muñoz, 61, who counts herself lucky to have dollars.

"You have to keep a level head to put up with all this, and try to have people around because being alone make it even harder."

### **Scouring trash**

For Kelvin Donaire, who lives in the poor Petare district, survival is complicated. He walks for more than an hour to the bakery where he works in the upmarket Los Palos Grandes area.

"At least I'm able to take a loaf back home," Donaire said.

Many inhabitants have taken to salting meat to preserve it without working refrigerators.

Others, more desperate, scour trash cans for food scraps. They are hurt most by having to live in a country where basic food and medicine has become scarce and out of reach because of rocketing hyperinflation.

The latest blackout this week also knocked out communications.

According to NetBlocks, an organisation monitoring telecoms networks, 85 percent of Venezuela has lost connection.

### **‘People need to eat’**

In stores, cash registers no longer work and electronic payment terminals are blanked out. That’s serious in Venezuela, where even bread is bought by card because of lack of cash. Some clients, trusted ones, are able to leave written IOUs.

“People need to eat. We let them take food and they will pay us when bank transfers come back,” explained shop owner Carlos Folache.

Underneath an office block of Digitel, one of the main mobile phone companies, dozens of people stand around trying to get a signal.

“I’m trying to get connected to get news... on this chaotic episode we’re going through,” said one man, Douglas Pérez.

With Caracas’s subway shut down, getting around the city is a trail, with choices between walking for miles, lining up in the outsized hope of getting on one of the rare and badly overcrowded and dilapidated buses or managing to get fuel for a vehicle.

Pedro José said bus tickets have nearly doubled in price. “A ticket used to cost 100 *bolivares* (around three US cents) and now it’s 1,500 (45 cents),” he raged.

As night casts Caracas into darkness, families light their homes as best they can.

“We make lamps that burn gasoline, or oil, or kerosene — any type of fuel,” explained Lizbeth Morin, 30.

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Source:

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