

Kazakhstan Withdraws from Central Asian Power Grid



ALMATY,

Kazakhstan (AP) — Kazakhstan announced Thursday it was pulling out of the Central Asian power grid to protect its energy supplies, a move that forced rolling blackouts and electricity rationing on Kyrgyzstan, its tiny, power-starved neighbor.

Kazakhstan said it had to withdraw from the power grid because Tajikistan — another small and cash-strapped Central Asian nation — was taking more energy from the grid than it was producing, threatening to disrupt supplies in Kazakhstan.

"As of Feb. 26, Tajik state energy company has made unscheduled use of 84 million kilowatt hours of electricity," the state-owned Kazakhstan Electricity Grid Operating Company said.

The Kazakh move means Kyrgyzstan must ration supplies in the northern half of the country, including the capital Bishkek, to avoid overloading the domestic grid, according to Kyrgyz power spokeswoman Ulyana Konvalova.

Failure to coordinate sharing resources is a chronic problem in the five countries of Central Asia, where Soviet-built electricity networks have been blighted in recent

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years by crumbling generation and distribution infrastructure.

And in tiny Kyrgyzstan, increasingly frequent power outages have caused public discontent. Kyrgyz opposition parties say government corruption is behind the mishandling of the country's power resources, which are especially strained during cold winter months.

An exceptionally cold winter last year forced authorities to generate additional electricity, leaving water levels dangerously low at a hydroelectric plant that generates 40 percent of the country's power. Kyrgyzstan relies heavily on hydropower to generate electricity for domestic customers.

A solution to Kyrgyzstan's energy problem appears distant, especially amid the global financial meltdown.

President Kurmanbek Bakiyev recently secured \$2.15 billion in aid and loans from Russia. Shortly after, lawmakers voted to close a U.S. military base near Bishkek.

However, if the base shuts down, Bishkek will forgo \$150 million in rent and other payments from Washington, a sum that approaches 2 percent of the Kyrgyz gross domestic product.

Meanwhile, Tajikistan, a mountainous country on Afghanistan's northeastern border, is already imposing severe power cuts across the country due to crippling shortages not linked to Kazakhstan's move on Thursday.

Electricity has been limited to 11 hours in the capital city, Dushanbe, and around four hours in the provinces.

State power company Barki Tojik says electricity supplies to some areas have

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been suspended altogether because of the energy crisis.

In October, energy-rich Turkmenistan pledged to supply Tajikistan with 1.2 billion kilowatt hours of electricity via Uzbekistan annually until 2012. But that arrangement broke down in January after Tajikistan failed to agree on a transit deal with Uzbekistan.

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