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Blackout hits Athens raising concerns about Olympics

By Patrick Quinn
 THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ATHENS, Greece — The worst blackout in more than a decade hit Athens and southern Greece on Monday, leaving millions sweltering in a heat wave and raising concerns about whether the lights will go out at next month's Olympics.

The government blamed the outage on "mismanagement" of the electricity grid. Still, officials promised the network was ready to handle the Aug. 13-29 Olympics.

But it was yet another hurdle in Athens' attempt to convince the world it is ready to host well-run and safe games. Olympics preparations have come under criticism because of construction delays and concerns over security arrangements to stop terror attacks.

The blackout knocked out air conditioners as afternoon temperatures soared to 104 degrees Monday. The power failure created enormous traffic jams from failed traffic signals and stalled electric trolleys. Hundreds of passengers on the Athens subway were forced to leave trains and walk, and the fire department received hundreds of calls about people trapped in elevators.

In one embarrassing moment for the government, Transport Minister Mihalis Liapis was making a test run to showcase a new Olympic rail link from central Athens to the airport — and got stranded en route when the power failed. Government officials said generators had to be pressed into service at Olympic venues. The domino-effect outages were traced to an imbalanced flow of electricity that shut down four power-generating stations, according to a senior government official who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Greece's Public Power Corp. did not explain what caused the blackout, saying only that it knocked out four major plants. The company — an Olympic sponsor — blamed the state-owned grid operator for the outage.

Others members of the Greek government flooded the media

with pledges that the Olympics are in no danger of going on.

There was more than enough power for a "smooth and uninterrupted" flow of electricity whole country during the Olympics, Development Minister Stasios Sioufas said.

He also noted that five additional electrical substations to go into operation next month to lower the chances of power spikes. Substations are electrical facilities where the voltage of incoming circuits is controlled and the current is distributed over lines.

The Athens Olympic Organizing Committee, meanwhile, gave assurances that games would proceed even if there's another outage. It said protections in place for everything crucial to the games, including the stadium and broadcasting equipment, were not affected by the incident.

Blackout hits parts of Greece

A widespread power outage hit Athens, Greece, on Monday and quickly spread to areas outside the capital.



SOURCE: ESRI AP

The blackout began at 11 p.m. in Athens and quickly spread.

Outages were reported as far as Larissa, 155 miles north of Athens, and the port of Amata, 175 miles to the south, also included some islands in the Aegean and Ionian seas.

Power was restored to 70 percent of the region in about an hour and to all of Athens in over three hours. Remote areas were affected longer.

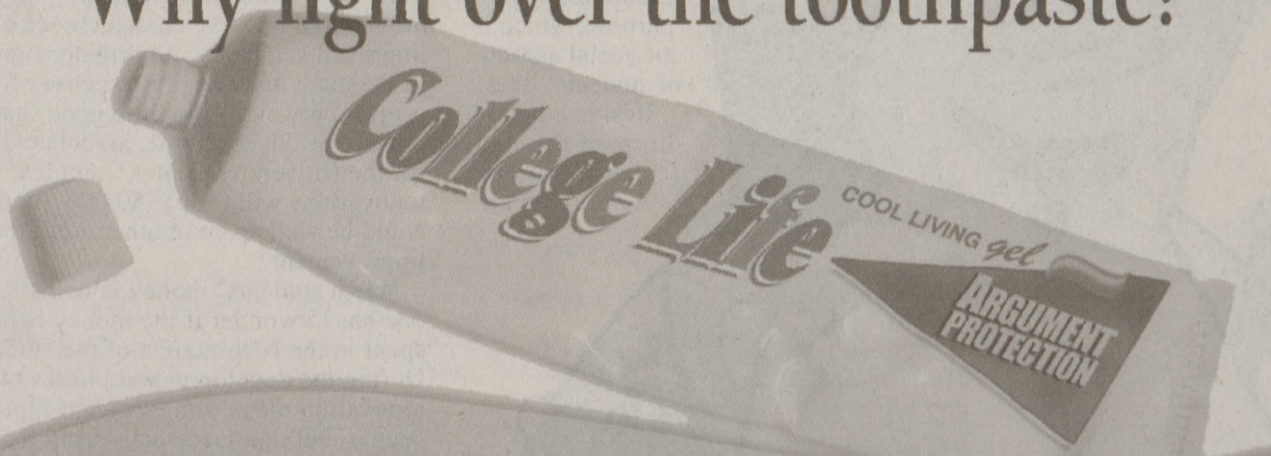
It was initially believed power outage was due to increased demand in air conditioner usage because of the heat, chief cause for most blackouts in Greece. Last summer, Athens was left without power for several hours because of increased air conditioner use.

However, Sioufas said, the cut was not due to a lack of power but mainly due to mismanagement of the high-voltage grid.

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Four Venezuelan firefighters die in crash

ANAHUAC, Texas (AP) — Driver fatigue may have been a factor in the crash of a sport utility vehicle that killed four Venezuelan firefighters and critically injured a fifth over the weekend, investigators said.

The firefighters' SUV struck the rear of a semi truck on the shoulder of Interstate 10 early Sunday.

Texas Department of Public Safety Trooper Dana Cothren said the driver of the firefighters' westbound Explorer drifted onto the shoulder just after 6:30 a.m., striking the truck which had pulled over beside the interstate.

Cothren said the impact pushed the truck, which did not have a trailer, off the shoulder. Two women and two men, including the SUV's driver, died in the scene. A fifth person was taken by helicopter to Memorial Hermann Hospital in Houston and remained in critical condition early Monday. The truck driver was not seriously injured.

The victims, whose names were not immediately released pending notification of relatives, were traveling as part of a three-vehicle caravan from College Station to attend a training academy at the Brayton fire station according to the Bryan-College Station Eagle's online edition Monday.

State troopers were trying to determine what caused the SUV to leave the road and strike the truck, whose driver had pulled over interstate to contact his company.

"He failed to drive in his lane and struck the back end" of the truck, Cothren told the Houston Chronicle in Monday's edition. "Why he did that — we don't know. Was he trying to avoid a body in front of him? We don't know."

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