

DAILY MAVERICK

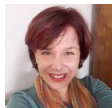
MAVERICK CITIZEN

POWER PLAY

Humanitarian crisis looms in Karoo as Eskom institutes load reduction on top of rolling blackouts in defaulting municipalities



Large parts of the Karoo are in crisis after Eskom began load reduction on top of loadshedding. (Photo: Donna van der Watt)



By Estelle Ellis

Follow

22 Dec 2022 26

Many defaulting municipalities across SA were hit on Thursday by load reduction — on top of load shedding. In the Karoo, with its high summer temperatures and a water system already left fragile by rolling blackouts, additional load reduction threatens to trigger a humanitarian crisis.

On Thursday morning, Graaff-Reinet resident Sias Smith looked at the prepaid meter in his house. "It was full of money. My money was in there. I owe Eskom nothing. But there was no electricity."

This was supposed to be joyful Christmas. Instead, residents were hit by another six hours without electricity — on top of rolling blackouts.

For the first festive season since 2019, there were no Covid-related restrictions. People in the Karoo were getting ready to make some money as visitors returned, en route to the province's beach towns. And families unable to travel for a while were finally home for Christmas.

Now the milk was turning, dessert ingredients were melting, people worried about their meat, drinks were no longer cold, the taps were dry, and there was anger in the streets of Graaff-Reinet. Farmers, businesspeople and residents gathered at the municipal offices.

"If there was anybody in there, they refused to come out," Smith said. "Neither the mayor nor the municipal manager was answering their phones."

Angry residents briefly closed the N9 highway. "But you know what I told them — these are just ordinary people. They want to get home to their families for Christmas. They still have a long way to go. Let's find a different way," said Smith.

So they retreated to the dusty streets of the Karoo town, where their tempers simmered in the heat on Thursday afternoon, as they waited for the water truck to arrive and the electricity to resume.

"Our homes are full because our people are here for the holidays. The food is going off because we haven't had electricity for 14 hours and no water. The municipality has sent a water truck, but many people need help, and there is not enough water for everybody," said Smith.

While Dr Beyers Naudé Local Municipality, which has its seat in Graaff-Reinet, owes R285-million in outstanding fees to Eskom, the municipality has a written undertaking from Eskom that as the dispute had been referred for arbitration, the municipality would not be included in the load reduction schedule.

'No communication from Eskom'

Mayor Willem Safers said they had received no communication from Eskom. The dispute about the outstanding fees payable to Eskom and a wheeling agreement (for using municipal infrastructure to distribute electricity) was in arbitration, he said.

Samantha Graham-Mare is the Democratic Alliance's Public Works spokesperson and a Graaff-Reinet resident. She said water provision would be compromised in all eight towns in the Dr Beyers Naudé Municipality, including some of SA's most vulnerable and poor communities like Klipplaat and Rietbrons. Under the current load shedding schedule alone, some areas in the municipality had no water for weeks as reservoirs ran dry.

Defaulting municipalities countrywide were hit by a load reduction plan suddenly implemented by Eskom. The Eastern Cape, with its many defaulting municipalities owing more than R3-billion to the power utility, was particularly hard hit.

The Walter Sisulu Local Municipality, based in Burgersdorp, has been in and out of court for years over its unpaid Eskom account of R444-million. It too was hit by load reduction and 12-hour outages, but said this was not because it owed Eskom money, but because the demand for electricity was too high in "the entire country".

Escalating crisis

As many of the towns in this municipality work on a single pump to provide water, the water crisis escalated with the power crisis.

There is also a chance that these outages will affect the Nooitgedacht water scheme (which brings water to the province and specifically to Nelson Mandela Bay), after a big plant in Steynsburg was also hit by load reduction.

Cradock had been hit by an unrelated water crisis, made worse by load shedding, but Eskom respected a court order obtained by the town's business forum a few years ago that prevented the power utility from implementing load reduction. But even with normal load shedding, the chairperson of the Cradock Business Forum, Wilhelm Smit, said he was paying a monthly bill of R32,000 to keep a generator going that allows him to run his fuel station.

According to information shared with the Eastern Cape legislature, municipalities in the Eastern Cape owe Eskom R3-billion. The Enoch Mgijima Local Municipality (Komani) is the biggest defaulter with a debt of R743-million, the Walter Sisulu Local Municipality (Aliwal North, Burgersdorp) owes R444-million, the King Sabata Dalindyebo Municipality (Mthatha) owes R132-million, the Raymond Mhlaba Municipality (Fort Beaufort) owes R265-million, the Inxuba Yethemba Local Municipality (Cradock) owes R325-million and the Dr Beyers Naudé Local Municipality owes R285-million.

On Thursday afternoon, the Raymond Mhlaba Municipality informed residents in Fort Beaufort that they would be subject to load reduction in addition to normal load shedding.

Ken Clark, the CEO of Twizza and an independent councillor in the Enoch Mgijima municipality, said they had received no advance notice of load reduction.

"This will explode into something that is hard to understand. The lack of action from the President must be addressed. It must start there."

Municipal account

Clark had been involved for the past five years in attempts to force the Enoch Mgijima Municipality to pay its account.

"Now it has come to this," he said. "We have to deal with this as a matter of great urgency. There will be court action because we as consumers owe Eskom

nothing. We are paying our electrical bills. The accountability is within the ANC itself.”

He said there were fears for the water situation in Komani as continual power outages would affect the water purification plant. “I guess that will be our next big issue.

“We were not told about load reduction at all, but it is clear that Eskom has a big crisis and they have no idea how to manage it.”

By Thursday night, despite promises to do so, Eskom had not issued a statement on the crisis. **DM/MC**