

NICARAGUA - Thirsty and in the Dark (by José Adán Silva, IPS)

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[IPS](#) - A severe drought is preventing Nicaragua's electric companies from operating at capacity. The energy crisis triggered protests recently when the period of electricity rationing reached 15 hours a day.

After four months of energy blackouts, thousands of people took to the streets of the capital last week to demand the removal of the multinational corporation Unión Fenosa, the leading electrical distributor in the country, and who residents blame for the lack of service.

In the southeastern city of Masaya, protesters threw rocks at the company's offices during the demonstrations.

The Spain-based company, which has held a distribution contract in Nicaragua since 2000, issued a clarification of its responsibility and said the country's energy deficit (calculated at some 140 megawatts) is due to imperfections at several generator plants and the hike in petroleum prices, but especially to the low levels of water in the reservoir of Apanás dam.

David Castillo, president of the Nicaraguan Energy Institute, had announced that the state-run hydroelectric company Hidrogesa, which generates energy from the Apanás reservoir, had stopped operating due to the drought.

The Apanás dam, in the northern department of Jinotega, normally generates 23 percent of the electricity consumed in Nicaragua.

According to Castillo, next summer the energy plant could collapse financially due to lack of water.

President Enrique Bolaños warned that if it doesn't rain soon, the energy crisis will worsen alongside public discontent.

Some experts link the water shortage with widespread deforestation, and warn that indiscriminate logging must be stopped.

"We are losing (water) at a dizzying rate. We have an average of 38,000 litres of water per capita in reserves, but the main watersheds are affected by the drought generated by deforestation," said Salvador Montenegro, director of CIRA, the aquatic resource research centre at the Autonomous National University of Nicaragua, in a Tierramérica interview.

The Apanás dam supplies 41,000 square km of urban area, just where the subterranean sources begin that feed the country's two big lakes: Xolotlán, polluted for more than 50 years, and Cocibolca, also affected by pollution for the past two decades.

Although Montenegro said he doesn't have exact data about the amount of water Nicaragua has lost to the destruction of forests, there are certain indicators that the country is facing a grave environmental situation.

In 1964, Lake Apanás covered 60 square km, with a forested shoreline. Now it has been reduced to 50 square km as a result of logging in the surrounding area, which led to the disappearance of the Viejo de Jinotega River, which fed the reservoir.

According to the Jinotega municipal secretary of environment, María Teresa Centeno, the artificial lake lost volume due to deforestation in its watershed and to unregulated irrigation of nearby fields.

CIRA studies indicate that in the southern high plains of Carazo the wells are losing nearly a metre of flow per year, while in the sierras surrounding the capital the loss is nearly 10 metres in the last eight years.

"If we continue like this, soon we will have to change the name of the capital. We are called Managua because, at one time, this land flowed with water practically by just perforating the surface," said Montenegro.

Experts warn that the country's vegetation coverage has been dramatically reduced. Eighty-five percent of the arid forests and 65 percent of the rainforests have disappeared, according to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

The Nicaraguan government says those figures are "approximate", and decreed a state of emergency in several of the country's departments where the army has orders to inspect vehicles carrying lumber as a means to prevent illegal trafficking of forest materials.

The measure remains in force and was strengthened with the creation of an environmental law that punishes crimes against forests and watersheds.

But for Jaime Morales, president of the National Assembly's environmental commission, these measures have come too late.

"Most (80 percent) of the country's watersheds are contaminated and degraded. What is left is to prevent their continued loss and to preserve them," said Morales.

José Adán Silva is a Tierramérica contributor. Originally published Aug. 26 by Latin American newspapers that are part of the Tierramérica network. Tierramérica is a specialised news service produced by IPS with the backing of the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations Environment Programme.

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