

## **Major blackout hits Zim**

Tuesday, June 16, 2009

*Herald Reporter*

### **VAST swathes of the country were last night plunged into darkness after Zesa lost power supplies from Hwange and Kariba power stations.**

The utility said supplies from Mozambique's Hidroelectrica de Cahora Bassa and from the Zambian power grid had inexplicably gone out, leaving large chunks of the country without electricity.

Zesa chief executive Engineer Ben Rafemoyo last night said they had fallen back onto emergency supplies from South Africa's Eskom to power the southern region, which remained unaffected by last night's blackout.

He said the emergency supplies were enough to power parts of the country up to the Midlands only.

He, however, said near normal service could be expected sometime this morning once Kariba Power Station was back on line.

At the time of going to Press, much of the capital, Mazowe, Norton and Chitungwiza, and large parts of the country going east up to Mutare were still in darkness as Zesa engineers tried to restore normal power supplies.

Supplies had, however, been restored to Harare's central business district and a few suburbs in the city.

Chinhoyi also did not have electricity, but the blackout occurred about two hours before the power outage that hit Harare and its environs around 8:20pm.

"We are still trying to recover, but suffice to say that there has been a system failure that has affected Hwange and Kariba power stations.

"The supply from Hidroelectrica de Cahora Bassa is also down and we have also lost supplies that come from the Zambian power grid.

"We are using emergency supplies from Eskom in South Africa and so there is no power from just after Midlands Province up to the eastern border.

"Once we recover supplies from Kariba, because Kariba does not take time to bring back on line, we will know what exactly has happened.

"I am at the control centre right now and we are also in darkness, but once Kariba is back we will be able to determine what took place.

"We are rushing to bring Kariba back right now and we should be near normalcy by morning," Eng Rafemoyo said last night.

He said the restoration of power to Harare's CBD was part of the process of recovery and more areas would have normal supplies as work progressed.

The loss of supplies from key regional partners like Mozambique's HCB and the Zambia Electricity Supply Company raised fears that Zesa had been cut off because of a mounting external debt.

The utility owes its regional suppliers over US\$57 million that has accrued since March this year.

This is on the back of average monthly revenue collections of US\$5 million as Zesa struggles to get customers to pay their bills, which the latter feel are unduly high.

This has prompted the utility to threaten to cut off supplies to defaulters.

Zesa last week announced that Government had given it the green light to disconnect those who have not paid their bills since February this year.

The power utility has announced that defaulters will be cut off from June 20.

There were also fears that the blackout could be linked to threats by Zesa workers to go on strike over a management decision to slash their allowances.

The workers gave the company up to June 20 — the same date that Zesa said it would switch off defaulting customers — to reinstate the conditions of service that were unilaterally trimmed last month.

However, Eng Rafemoyo was quick to assure the public that the blackout had nothing to do with internal administrative issues affecting the utility.

"No, it has nothing to do with that. A blackout of this magnitude cannot have anything to do with internal and domestic matters such as that.

"If Mr Rafemoyo fails to pay his bill, that cannot take out the power supplies to such large sections of the country," the Zesa boss said.