Power outages inevitable – D’ujiang

By Benedict Okeithweeng

Electricity consumers in West Nile will have to wait longer and brace themselves for tougher times before they begin receiving sufficient power.

State minister for energy Simon D’ujiang has said power outages in the region are inevitable.

According to D’ujiang, the dry spell has significantly affected the level of River Nyagak, which supplies the 35MW of hydro power to the area.

The minister was speaking at the golden jubilee celebrations for St Peter’s College Warakir Girls in West Nile recently.

“Power supply has been grossly affected in West Nile. We hope that when it starts raining, we shall have better power supply,” D’ujiang said.

The minister however, said the Government has a number of programmes aimed at improving the electricity supply in the region.

D’ujiang explained that with support from the World Bank, the Government intends to construct a 550kV line from Lira to connect the region to the national grid. He added that works regarding the project are underway with routing, crop compensation and land acquisition.

D’ujiang said they are also considering constructing another dam downstream of the Nyagak to help boost power supply, adding that they have acquired 3540m from the East Bank, to help extend electricity to sub-counties.

“We are doing our best to improve electricity reliability in the West Nile through Parliament,” we have secured 3540m to extend power to sub-counties which missed in the first phase,” D’ujiang said.

Businesses affected

West Nile is currently experiencing its worst power generation reduction, coupled with the normal rise in consumption.

The frequent power outages have left business operators and residents counting losses.

Businesses are affected not only by load shedding, but the power surges as well. For instance, when power returns at high voltage after an outage, it destroys equipment, especially for those businesses which have not installed protectors. The hardest-hit businesses are those that entirely rely on power to run. They include beauty salons, metal fabrication workshops, restaurants and bars.

Residents speak out

“When power goes, businesses come to a standstill. Then when it returns, some of our appliances blow,” Alfred Onowudir, a bar owner in Nebbi, said.

Lydia Akech, who runs a beauty salon, said she is making losses because frequent power outages have destroyed some of her equipment.

She added that the number of customers has also dropped because whenever she uses a generator, the price of her services doubles.

Most salons in the region charge between sh10,000 and sh15,000 when using hydropower. The price usually doubles when using thermal fuel.

“I have lost lots of equipment due to power outages,” Akech said.

Romano Manza, a restaurant owner, said: “I dispose of juice daily because power goes off. But worst of all the cost of fuel for running a generator is too high.”

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West Nile Rural Electrification Company

The power problems in West Nile come at a time when the WENRECo has increased the electricity tariff from sh635.2 to sh422.5 for domestic voltage users and sh82.5 to sh60.5 for agricultural voltage users.

West Nile Rural Electrification Company (WENRECo) was awarded a 20-year concession to generate and distribute power in the West Nile region in April 2003.

In 2013, President Yoweri Museveni also switched on the Nyagak hydropower project. It became the only main source of clean energy replacing the diesel-powered generators.

It was anticipated that the launch would provide the energy for 24 hours of reliable and cheaper electricity supply to West Nile and also unlock the region’s economic potential progress.

But the situation has never improved, prompting leaders in the region, such as Arua County MP Bernard Atiku, to call for the termination of the services of WENRECo.

Water level

Emmy Kakru, the former district chairperson noted that even when the water level was high, there were power outages. “It is the low water level that has not come as an excuse for them to supply as we have had power supply being cut even when the water level is high,” Kakru said.

He noted that there was a need to restore the catchment area of River Nyagak, right from its source in the DR Congo.

“I don’t say much effort being put to preserve the catchment area; we need a lot of trees planted on the Nyagak River banks to avoid the scenario of the water levels,” he said.

Information available

Uganda Electricity Transmission Company indicates that the country has targeted at providing an additional 2,055MW in 2018 to meet the increasing demand.

Currently, Uganda has a short term surplus situation, but the rapidly growing demand of 10% per annum will overtake this status if no new power generation is commissioned in the medium term.

Uganda’s power system demand currently stands at 500 MW, against an installed generation capacity of 851.53MW with a peak capacity of 496MW that varies in accordance with prevailing hydrological conditions.