Haiti seeks to rebuild, or just build, power grid

TRENTON DANIEL - Associated Press - Associated Press

Sometimes it seems as though the people here have only the sun and moon: the blinding sun that bakes their mud homes and moonlight that with flickering gas lamps fights against the dark of night.

Electricity arrived just three months ago in this mountain village, and it's gone as often as it's on. With no power, there is no industry, just tiny farms and grinding hunger. Now that will be changing, with the help of that sun.

A Haitian aid agency has just installed 63 solar panels that will power the pumps of a fish hatchery it hopes will give jobs to 100 people after it formally opens next month.

Boucan Carre is among dozens of projects across Haiti where the government and development agencies are using some of the $4.5 billion in earthquake aid to solve one of the bottlenecks that kept Haiti in poverty long before the shattering earthquake of January 2010: a critical lack of electricity of any sort, whether from hydro plants, solar cells or oil-fired generators.

Only a quarter of Haiti's 10 million people have regular access to electricity and spotty supply hampers businesses and scares away foreign investors. The scarcity touches just about every aspect of Haitian life. Students read by candlelight. Haiti's wealthy power their homes with rumbling generators, a costly ordeal because fuel fetches $5 a gallon in a country where 80 percent of the population makes less than $2 a day.

President Michel Martelly's administration hopes to double the number of rural homes with access to power by helping villagers acquire solar-power systems, reforming the state power company and refurbishing the country's largest energy generator. In all, some $260 million has been earmarked for energy projects so far.

"If we properly tackle the energy problem we will infuse a dynamic into the whole development process of Haiti," said Rene Jean-Jumeau, who oversees the government's energy department. The absence of electricity is "the biggest thing that's impeding development."

Boucan Carre's 6,000 people live along a river named Fonlanfe — roughly "deep as hell" — that surges in the rainy season and that aid workers are using to supply the fish farm, which will need a steady supply of power.

"It has to be reliable because you need electricity 24 hours a day," said Valentin Abe of the Caribbean Harvest Foundation, the Haitian nonprofit that is donating the fish. The Washington-based Solar Electric Light Fund received a $500,000 grant from the Clinton Bush Haiti Fund for the hatchery.

The solar panels and batteries power pumps that pull water from a river and add oxygen to six, 12,000-gallon tanks filled with baby fish. The extra oxygen raises the yield of fish from 2,000 a month to 20,000.

The fish are then given to the farmers who raise them at a nearby lake. Valentin hopes that people who now live on less than a dollar a day working at small farm plots will have annual profits of $2,000 each, in addition to a source of protein-rich meals.

Elsewhere, the government working with banks to award more than $30 million in low-interest loans so that 200,000 families can buy portable solar-power kits.

The biggest target is Haiti's decrepit electric company, which eats up $100 million a year in official subsidies, 12 percent of the government's budget.

It hasn't been able to crack down on Haitians who just steal power by tapping illegally into the grid, and cannot provide steady power to any of its customers, even in the capital.

In Port-au-Prince, a team of carpenters build bed frames, doors and coffins, all by hand, in the shade of a tarp strung among tree trunks. One of them, 55-year-old Francis Pierre, longs to use his power tools but says there is seldom electricity.

"We would be able to make more, produce more," he said.

Haitian officials turned to the U.S. Agency for International Development, which awarded a contract to a private utility operator, Tetra Tech Inc. of Pasadena, California, to manage the electric company for two years. USAID is also repairing five substations in the capital, Port-au-Prince, and is studying the possibility of using solar panels for an industrial park in the north.

One of the biggest projects is the Inter-American Development Bank's $48.8-million plan to refurbish Haiti's Peligre hydroelectric plant, the country's largest energy producer. It now operates at less than half its original capacity of 54 megawatts because its reservoir hasn't been properly maintained.

The cell phone company Digicel, Haiti's largest employer, has built about 180 solar-powered lamps in the countryside and hopes to add 1,000 more by next year. Each light features an outlet for charging mobile phones.

Boston-based Partners in Health has installed solar panels in the hospitals it runs with the Health Ministry, and plans to build more with the Solar Electric Light Fund.

"If we would go three hours without electricity and the refrigerator doesn't work, there's a risk we'll lose our supply of medication," said Raymond Abraham, a 30-year-old pharmacist in training at the Boucan Carre hospital, which is powered with solar panels on the roof. "The best solution to resolve the blackout situation is solar energy."

In Port-au-Prince, solar lamps illuminate a winding thoroughfare that takes motorists to the mountains above the capital as well as the settlement camps that sprung up after the earthquake.

But solar energy panels are expensive and the equipment is not always easy to repair. Replacement parts often are not available in Haiti.

Energy development "needs to be locally controlled and not a dumping of technology from abroad," said Joel Kupferman, executive director of the Environmental Justice Initiative for Haiti.

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