

# Forget the lights, we're worried about the fridge

Spoilt food an issue in blackouts, but S'pore electricity supply is among most reliable

Lin Yangchen

The biggest problem with a long blackout is not the lack of light but the lack of refrigeration, as Mr Lim Cher Hian found out.

When a void-deck fire destroyed the wiring and cut off the electricity in his flat at Block 14A, Lorong 7, Toa Payoh for an entire day in June, the 74-year-old fish soup seller had to move his stock of chilled fish to his stall a few blocks away, pushing it on a market trolley.

Still, the family had to throw out a large portion of perishables in their two refrigerators, including meat and fresh milk.

Mr Lim's neighbour, national serviceman Hanzah Hasbullah, 20, said his family also had to throw out spoiling food in the refrigerator.

Rather than wait out the outage, the family of five brothers, their parents and their helper went to stay at his aunt's home in Woodlands for the night.

After the episode, Mr Lim bought two LED torchlights just in case, but he was not unduly concerned it would happen again.

"We've lived here for almost 20 years and the power in the flat trips occasionally and we reset it, but there have never been any blackouts (prior to the recent one)."

Indeed, though it may have been small comfort to the 100 households or so which had to go without power for a day, surveys over the last few years by global energy consultancy Det Norske Veritas Germanischer Lloyd (DNV GL) have ranked Singapore among the best in the world in the reliability of its electricity supply.

National grid operator SP Group told The Sunday Times it achieved an all-time low over the last financial year of 15 seconds' outage per year per electricity account, compared with about half an hour in the early 1990s.

This means that the chances of a Singaporean experiencing a blackout is once in 169 years, it added.

The 15-second outage rate is much lower than, for example, Hong Kong's 23.4 minutes, New York's 20.53 minutes and London's 33.6 minutes, according to 2015 data from DNV GL.

And 98 per cent of outages are restored within two hours, said the operator.

For retailers, blackouts put businesses at stake, but recent incidents at shopping malls have not lasted long enough to have a huge impact.

For example, at about 7pm on June 22, the electricity went dead after a power trip in the shops on all eight floors of 313@Somerset in Orchard Road. It lasted slightly over an hour and the corridor lights stayed on during the time.

The Sunday Times spoke to a staff member of the Zara store, spread over three levels of the mall. The employee, who requested to remain anonymous, said it was the very first time she had experienced a blackout.

"When the lights went out, several customers were trying on clothes in the fitting room," she said, recounting the confusion.

As the security sensors at the exits were also off, staff were told to be more vigilant.



Mr Lim Cher Hian and his wife, Madam Leow Lee Keng, in their flat at Block 14A, Lorong 7, Toa Payoh. Their flat's electricity supply was cut off for a day in June, so he bought two LED torchlights as a standby. ST PHOTO: LIN YANGCHEN

MOSTLY RELIABLE SUPPLY

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**MR LIM CHER HIAN**, whose Toa Payoh flat had a blackout in June, after a void-deck fire destroyed the wiring.

They also had to use the light from their smartphones to see the cash register, which they manually opened with a key.

Needless to say, only cash could be accepted.

A few levels down, on the second basement level, Mr Darius Octavo, 35, manager of health food outlet Haakon Superfoods and Juice, said he closed an hour early as the staff could not operate appliances such as juice mixers.

Things were more dramatic 10 years ago.

In one of the largest blackouts here in recent times, a third of Singapore went dark in the evening of June 29, 2004.

It was caused by a disruption to the natural gas supply from Indonesia when an emergency valve shut off, and lasted about two hours, even triggering fears of terrorism.

However, other countries have seen worse. On the evening of July 13, 1977, New York was plunged into a 24-hour blackout when lightning disabled power lines, setting off widespread looting and arson in the poorer neighbourhoods.

More recently, a huge blackout

across Central America plunged millions into darkness for three hours on July 1. The authorities blamed it on a downed transmission line in Panama that affected multiple countries connected to the same grid.

The largest blackout in history shut down much of India from July 30 to 31 in 2012, and affected more than 620 million people, or half the country's population. It was thought to have been caused by excessive demand, which caused a cascade of circuit-breaker trips.

A Japanese movie released earlier this year demonstrated how reliant people are on modern power generation.

Survival Family follows a family's desperate journey by bicycle and foot to find electricity while life as they knew it comes to a standstill.

The power eventually comes back on, but not before they return to their grandfather's village to lead a basic life and realise that modern society takes too many things for granted – especially electricity.

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