

International

Hundreds of shops looted in Venezuela blackout: Traders

Diplomats walk out of UN conference in Venezuela protest

CARACAS: More than 500 shops were looted in Venezuela's western city of Maracaibo during a vast nationwide blackout that struck last week and lasted for days, a retailers' association said Wednesday. The Consecomercio association called on beleaguered security forces to reimpose order in Maracaibo and its surrounds.

In a statement, it said it lamented the "impunity with which mobs, taking advantage of the electricity crisis... destroyed installations" in Maracaibo's main shopping center and in "500 other establishments." The blackout, which cut power to 21 of Venezuela's 23 states last Thursday, was still going in western parts of the country.

Electricity had mostly been restored to the capital Caracas and other regions, but drinking water supplies remained disrupted, requiring water to be trucked in. The reason for the unprecedented power cut has not been determined. President Nicolas Maduro blamed it on "sabotage" by the United States and the opposition. Opposition leader and self-proclaimed interim president Juan Guaido—who is backed by the US and 50 other countries—told supporters corruption and mismanagement by Maduro's "dictatorship" was the root cause.



Tension mounts as crisis rages

Maracaibo suffered the worst of the looting, but other places, including Caracas, registered some pillaging of shops too. The head of Consecomercio, Felipe Capozzolo, urged authorities to act, stressing on Twitter that looting could undermine retailers' stockage and distribution of food and basic goods that have become increasingly scarce under Venezuela's economic crisis. The blackout made matters worse by cutting power to refrigerators and freezers, ruining produce inside. According to economic analysis firm Ecoanalitica, the blackout cost Venezuela \$875 million.

Diplomats walk out

In another development, diplomats yesterday walked out of a UN convention on drugs addressed by Venezuelan Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza, saying his government was illegitimate and

did not represent the country. Dozens of officials from Latin America, as well as the US, Canada and some European countries, including France, left the room in protest as Arreaza took the podium for the meeting of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) in Vienna.

"The members of the Venezuela delegation here today represent the illegitimate government of



CARACAS: A man fills containers with water flowing down from the Wuaraira Repano mountain, also called 'El Avila', in Caracas. The blackout has left millions without running water. —AFP

(Venezuela's President) Nicolas Maduro, and thus cannot be considered as speaking on behalf of the Venezuelan people," a spokesperson of the US Mission to International Organizations said in a statement after the walk-out.

Multiple diplomats including from Latin America and Europe had staged a walk-out late last month during an Arreaza address to the United Nations

Human Rights Council in Geneva, when he called for direct talks between Maduro and US President Donald Trump about the country's crisis. Arreaza said in his speech in Vienna yesterday that the drug epidemic could only be combated multilaterally, adding that US "unilateral economic steps" have cost the country billions, diverting funds from the fight against drugs. —Agencies

US lawmakers tuck into juicy debate over meat substitutes

NEW YORK: Towering over a wooden podium in the Arkansas General Assembly this month, Republican representative David Hillman, a self-declared calf-roper, spoke of steak to pitch his latest bill. "I want my rib-eye steak to have been walking around on four feet at one time or another," he said. His proposal, making it illegal for meat-substitute products to be labeled as meat, was swiftly adopted.

Across the United States, tens of similar bills have been introduced - some unsuccessfully - as well as half a dozen with opposing aims, as an out-of-sight battle heats up between friends and foes of plant-based meat. One key issue at stake is whether the rise of alternative meat in the world's largest beef and veal-producing nation could substantially reduce its planet-warming emissions.

Rearing animals is a major driver of climate change - accounting for nearly 15 percent of greenhouse gas emissions - while producing meat uses land and water less efficiently than growing crops, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization says. Increasingly, many environmentalists are placing their hopes in greener alternatives for carnivores, including lab-grown meat. Led by plant-based foods, which mimic the taste, texture and look of meat, the US alt-meat market is forecast to nearly double to \$2.5 billion by 2023, according to market research firm Euromonitor International. Lab-grown meat is not yet being sold. The trend has put the country's half-a-million meat-industry workers on edge, and prompted more than 20 meat-producing states, from Wyoming to Indiana and Nebraska, to look at adopting legislation similar to Hillman's, according to The Good Food Institute, a nonprofit that promotes meat alternatives. —Reuters

Venezuela's US invasion: the dollar takes hold

CARACAS: Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro may be fiercely opposed to the "imperialist" United States. But in one regard, a US invasion is already happening: the dollarization of his South American country. Dollar bills are mixed in with wads of the near-worthless bolivar in markets. Long lines form for an opportunity to buy dollars. Shops offering scant and desperately sought basic items are increasingly demanding dollars as payment. The adoption of the US currency had been creeping in for months, as Venezuela's jaw-dropping inflation — projected to be 10 million percent this year, according to the IMF — meant the use of the bolivar was largely restricted to purchases by debit cards or bank transfers. But with an unprecedented power blackout since last week, electronic transactions were knocked out, and Venezuelans turned to the only option left: the greenback. "There was no power, and when it did come back, we had connection problems with the card terminals and the banks. People turned up with dollars, and from there you do a deal," the owner of a Caracas bakery, Martin Xabier said. "Everybody is doing that around here," he explained, indicating his working-class district of Catia in the capital's west and a line of a dozen people outside his shop.

Cash is king

In the more upmarket eastern district of Altamira, another line stood in front of a small grocery store that did business behind a locked security grate. "We only take cash, people! Bolivares or dollars!" the manager declared. "An old woman started crying. 'I don't have anyone to send me dollars. What can I do?'" she said, saying she was there to buy milk for her grandson and the bolivares she had were insufficient.

In a market in the nearby neighborhood of Chacao, the dollar ruled supreme. "Many people are paying with dollars... We need to take cash only and people don't have bolivares. Or if they have them they have to bring the banknotes in a wheelbarrow," said Maria del Carmen Pereira, owner of a half-empty deli-

catessen. But Franklin Garcia, who runs a small grocery store in the central La Candelaria neighborhood, said: "We aren't seeing a lot of people, but they are coming with small banknotes, of \$10 or \$20." He said that, in any case, he had lost a lot of produce because the blackout ruined food kept in his freezer.

'Irreversible' trend

As of Wednesday, \$1 was worth around 3,000 bolivares, of which the biggest denomination was a 500-bolivar bill equivalent to around 17 US cents. The average Venezuelan salary has sunk to the equivalent of \$6 per month. But much food and basic goods are imported, with a chicken for instance costing \$3 or \$4 in a Caracas supermarket. The problem for millions of Venezuelans is they have no access to dollars, which is creating "extreme inequality," according to Asdrubal Oliveros, head of the economic analysis firm Econanalitica. Henke Garcia, head of another firm, Econometrica, said: "Dollarization has to do with inflation, that is the fundamental cause. This traumatic episode (the blackout) might have accelerated its uptake with people more apt to receive payments in dollars. The trend is now irreversible."

Lines for ice

Electricity supply was nearly back to normal in Caracas by Wednesday, which meant mostly stable but with some interruption. But in western parts of Venezuela, power was still out. "Here, everything is sold in dollars: cheese, bananas, bread, cellphone recharges, ice," said Roxana Pena, a 26-year-old resident in the western oil hub of Maracaibo. Her city, scene of much looting during the blackout, has witnessed lines of people that stretch for kilometers (miles) to spend \$5 to buy blocks of ice needed to preserve fresh food. "A lot of people don't have anything to pay with," sighed an elderly local, Margara Bermudez. The United Nations estimates there are 3.4 million Venezuelans who have emigrated since the crisis in their country began. Many of them send remittances to relatives who remain, but substantial numbers of Venezuelans have no such financial lifeline. Maduro "can't guarantee water or power or medicines," his opposition rival and self-proclaimed interim president, Juan Guaido, told supporters on Tuesday. The bolivar "is no longer respectable money, able to buy food," he said. Maduro accuses Guaido of involvement in the blackout, imputing it to "cybernetic" and "electromagnetic" attacks by the US, which is one of some 50 countries recognizing the opposition leader. Experts however believe the energy collapse is the result of mismanagement, corruption and lack of investment under Maduro's government. —AFP