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Nepal turns back on hydropower

BBC Nepali Service - Just when switching over to clean energy to fight climate change has become a global mantra, water-rich Nepal appears to be heading in the opposite direction, changing from renewable to dirty energy.

To deal with crippling power cuts that last two thirds of a day, the government has declared a national power crisis, and announced a plan to install a series of generators of up to 200 megawatts (MW).

They will run on diesel, a fossil fuel that emits the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide.

Officials at the Water Resources Ministry, responsible for power supplies, said there were talks about importing the generation plants from China, which reportedly had many of them spare after hosting last year's Olympics.

"The government may consider other options of suppliers as well," said Anup Upadhyay, the ministry's joint secretary.

"What is important is we will have to get thermal plants to immediately address the load shedding, it's a compulsion."

Having been hit hard by the power cuts, the private manufacturing sector is also stressing the need for businesses to install their own electricity generators.

Most of these will again be equipment run on diesel.

Some factories already have diesel powered generators, with a total installed capacity of about 15MW, and the government wants them to install even more.

"With such increase and additional new plants in private factories, we may be able to add about 30MW to the national grid," Mr Upadhyay suggested.

Traditionally, Nepal is not known for generating electricity using fossil fuels.

With more than 6,000 rivers and rivulets gushing down the Himalayan foothills, snaking through the country's rugged topography, have the potential to power tens of thousands of megawatts.



To date, only a small percentage of the potential hydro-electricity generation capacity has been tapped, providing electricity to less than 40% of Nepal's population.

However, the nation - until now - has stuck to hydropower over the years, maintaining a clean energy track record.

In 2007, it won the prestigious Ashden Award for replacing diesel powered mills with water-powered ones.

Two years earlier, it won another Ashden Award for a scheme that used cow dung to generate electricity.

The bio-gas project had even been able to sell surplus carbon credits to the World Bank under the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) of the UN's Kyoto Protocol.

Although the Nepalese have the biggest electricity bills in the region, the government continued to promote hydropower.

But all that is changing now, as demand for electricity quickly outstrips supply.

The huge costs of developing hydropower, coupled with political wrangles and alleged mismanagement, has made matters worse.

Low water levels in rivers during the dry season has also meant that generation capacities of hydro-plants have halved.

It is not the first time that Nepal has experienced electricity shortages, but this year's 16-hour outages each day have been painfully long.

And it appears as if there is no respite in sight.

The state-owned Nepal Electricity Authority and international aid agencies has been projecting for a

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number of years that demand was set to outstrip supply. So why was nothing done?

There appears to be a host of reasons, ranging from local, to national and international circumstances.

Major large hydroelectric project partnerships with India, agreed years ago, have never moved off the drawing board.

And the medium to small-scale projects that Nepal planned to construct itself either failed to happen or were severely delayed by the 10-year Maoist insurgency that left more than 13,000 people dead.

During the insurgency, the Maoists were repeatedly accused of disrupting the construction works.

Today's government, which the Maoists now lead, says the present problems are the result of not doing anything in the past.

Declaring the national power crisis recently, it brought out a work plan consisting of emergency, short and long-term measures.

Installation of the diesel-powered plants was considered to be part of the emergency work plan.

But energy experts say this approach is wrong, especially for a nation with access to so much potential hydropower.

"The decision by the government to bring in 200MW of diesel generation is indeed a step backwards," says Biksh Pandey, a director of Winrock International, a clean energy specialist organisation.

"While the world is moving from dirty to clean energy, Nepal would be going in the other direction."

Criticism from a number of areas led to speculation that the government might change its mind on the diesel decision.

But Water Resources Minister Bishnu Poudel did not give the impression of someone about to change their mind.

"After the last announcement of the measures to deal with load shedding, we have not made any new decision," he told the BBC.