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# Massive Blackout Hits U.S., Canada

Aug. 14, 2003

**FREE VIDEO**  
**Lights Out In Northeast**



Office workers swarm West Street in Manhattan. (Photo: CBS/WCBS)

**QUOTE**  
**"Slowly but surely we're coping with this massive, national problem."**  
 President Bush



Stranded commuters gather outside Grand Central Station in New York. (Photo: AP)

**(CBS/AP)** An extraordinary power blackout hit steamy U.S. and Canadian cities Thursday, stranding people in subways, closing nine nuclear power plants from New York to Michigan and choking streets with workers driven from stifling offices.

Power began to come back in some cities as afternoon turned to evening, but officials said full restoration would take much longer.

By 9:30 p.m. ET, some power had been restored to New York City. Mayor Michael Bloomberg said officials expect the city to be back to business as usual tomorrow.

Officials were looking at a power transmission problem from Canada as the most likely cause for what some are calling the biggest electrical outage in U.S. history, said a spokeswoman for New York Gov. George Pataki.

Canadian authorities said it appeared lightning had struck a power plant on the U.S. side of the border in the Niagara Falls region, setting off outages that spread over an area of 9,300 square miles with a population of roughly 50 million people.

President Bush said Thursday evening that people affected by the huge blackout may not see their lives return to normal right away, but "slowly but surely we're coping with this massive, national problem."

The president told reporters in San Diego: "I have been working with federal officials to make sure the response to this situation was quick and thorough, and I believe it has been."

But, Mr. Bush said, state and local officials have not asked the federal government for much help as of yet.

Terrorism was not the cause of the outage, the president said.

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Dan Rather reports that the power has come back on in some places, including Akron, Ohio, but the official cause of the massive outage is still unknown.

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The blackouts affected a broad swath of the Northeast stretching west to Ohio and Michigan and into southern Canada, starting shortly after 4 p.m. EDT. In Toronto, Canada's largest city, workers fled their buildings when the power went off. There also were widespread outages in Ottawa, the capital.

Nine nuclear power reactors – six in New York and one each in New Jersey, Ohio and Michigan – were shut down because of the loss of offsite power, according to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission in Bethesda, Md.

Flights in and out of JFK Airport in New York, as well as airports in Toronto and Ottawa were grounded, leaving passengers stranded. Flights also were halted for more than three hours in and out of New York LaGuardia, Cleveland and Newark, N.J., but those airports reopened before 8 p.m. EDT.

The blackout closed the Detroit-Windsor Tunnel, which 27,000 vehicles use daily, and silenced the gambling machines at Detroit's Greektown Casino. Patrons filed into the afternoon heat carrying cups of tokens.

Traffic lights were out throughout

downtown Cleveland and other major cities, creating havoc at the beginning of rush hour. Cleveland officials said that without the power needed to pump water to 1.5 million people, water reserves were running low.

Gov. Pataki said more than half of New York State was without power. He said there were supposed to be backup systems to prevent blackouts from snowballing, and that "there have to be some tough questions asked."

In New York City, subways and elevators lost electricity or resorted to limited backup power. Thousands of people streamed into the streets of lower Manhattan in 90-degree heat, and some subway commuters were still stuck underground hours after the blackout hit.

Amtrak suspended passenger rail service between New Haven, Conn., and Newark. Some northbound trains from Washington, a city that did not lose power, turned around at Newark.

There were outages in northern New Jersey and in several Vermont towns. Lights flickered at state government buildings in Hartford, Conn.

In Massachusetts, Kim Hicks of Baltic, Conn., was on the Cyclone roller coaster at a Six Flags amusement park in Agawam when the power stopped. "We sat there about 20 minutes and they finally came to walk us off," she said. The park regained power a short time later.

In Cleveland, Olga Kropko, a University Hospitals labor and delivery nurse, said the hospital was using its back-up generators and had limited power. "Everyone is very hot because the air conditioning is off," she said. "Our laboring moms are suffering."

John Meehan, 56, walked down 37 stories in the BP Tower in downtown Cleveland, wearing his suit and carrying a briefcase. "It makes you wonder, was this terrorism or what?" he asked.

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In Washington, the Health and Human Services Department said the biggest health concern was people getting overheated and dehydrated, something local health systems appeared to be handling, said spokesman Campbell Gardett.

The blackouts easily surpassed those in the West on Aug. 11, 1996, in terms of people affected. Then, heat, sagging power lines and unusually high demand for electricity caused an outage for 4 million customers in nine states.

An outage in New York City in 1977 left 9 million people without electricity for up to 25 hours. In 1965, about 25 million people across New York state and most of New England lost electricity for a day.

On Thursday, Mayor Bloomberg asked the city's more than 8 million people to be calm, go home, open windows and drink water.

"Be sure you don't make an inconvenience into a tragedy," he said.

For New York police, the focus was on the ramifications of the blackout rather than its cause.

"We're more concerned about getting the traffic lights running and making sure the city is OK than what caused it," said a spokesman at the department's operations center downtown.

"The good news is that in New York City, while we have lost all the power, Con Ed's facilities have shut down properly, which we have programmed them to do," said Bloomberg.

In Times Square, Giovanna Leonardo, 26, was waiting in a line of 200 people for a bus to Staten Island.

"I'm scared," she said. "It's that unknown 'what's going on' feeling. Everyone's panicking. The city's shutting down."

Along several blocks near midtown Manhattan, deli owners brought their suddenly unrefrigerated food out on tables, iced in buckets. "Half price on everything," read one sign.

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