

Power cuts, vandalism, theft prompt MTN security moves

Rolling power cuts, vandalism and battery theft have forced MTN Group's South African arm to invest R1.5bn (\$84m) to ensure its mobile network operates effectively.



A MTN Group server is seen in Johannesburg, South Africa, on 30 March 2023. Reuters/Shafiek Tassiem

State electricity utility Eskom is implementing the worst rolling blackouts on record as its ageing coal plants fail, leaving households and businesses in Africa's most advanced economy in the dark for up to 10 hours a day.

The telecom industry in particular is having to crank up diesel generators to power its vast towers, roll out additional batteries and increase security to protect them from theft and vandalism, costs that are putting pressure on their margins.

Charles Molapisi, chief executive of MTN South Africa said its nationwide "network resilience" programme will help enhance network availability and stability over the long term.

"The investment will see us installing solar power, batteries and generators, and enhancing security features at base stations to ensure improved network availability during load shedding when many instances of theft and vandalism occur," he said.

MTN said it has upgraded 3,253 sites with new batteries and aims to complete this by May, which should significantly improve network availability in the second half of the year.

Data shows that during the longer consecutive hours of power cuts last year, vandalism and battery or generator theft at base stations spiked, MTN said, resulting in tower companies recording a 250% increase in the loss of generators.

More than 1,000 vandalism incidents have been recorded since January 2022 in the Eastern Cape alone, it added.

To protect these sites, MTN and London-based IHS Tower, MTN's tower site partner, are looking at solutions such as concrete blocks to secure batteries, concrete bunkers and high-security cabinets.

At one of the damaged base stations, technicians showed reporters an almost empty container, stripped of cables, air conditioning and radio transmission processors. The only thing that remained were concrete-covered batteries.

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