**Malawi: Lightning strikes trip power, cause political crisis**

Report

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LILONGWE, 22 Dec 2004 (IRIN) - Divisions within Malawi's ruling party have been brought to a head by a countrywide power failure.

The ruling United Democratic Front (UDF), which has been divided over President Bingu wa Mutharika's style of leadership, is demanding the resignation of Minister of Mines, Natural Resources and Environment, Davies Katsonga.

The minister has accused some UDF officials of being behind a countrywide power blackout that occurred while the presidents of Zambia, Tanzania, Mozambique and Malawi were launching the Mtwara Development Corridor (MDC) on Wednesday last week in the capital, Lilongwe.

The calls for minister Katsonga to resign were indicative of the rift between Mutharika's supporters in government and those outside, who favoured UDF national chairman and former president Bakili Muluzi, analysts told IRIN.

Katsonga had also called for Muluzi to distance himself from the supposed saboteurs.

The party has denied Katsonga's allegations.

About two weeks Mutharika experienced another power failure when he attended a graduation ceremony at Mzuzu University in the Northern Region. He warned then that "anyone who gets involved in the sabotage will be dealt with, once found. You are not embarrassing the president but the nation, because this scares away investors".

Government has set up a task team of officials from the Electricity Supply Commission (Escom), the Office of the President and Cabinet, the police, and the National Intelligence Bureau to investigate the disruptions in the country's electricity supply.

Escom's public relations officer, Chikondi Chimala, told IRIN that lightning strikes had caused the national blackout.

Executive director of the Institute for Policy Interaction, Rafiq Hajat, said, "Escom has been poorly managed and this is the reason why we are seeing these problems. The appointment of the Escom board is not on merit, and there was a lot of interferance in its operations from the word 'go'. Unless we have qualified individuals at the top of the organisation, we will not sort out the mess".

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