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South African taps run dry after power shortages

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BBC News, Johannesburg

The peace of a normally tranquil suburban road near South Africa's capital, Pretoria, is being shattered by the sound of drilling.

These are not prospectors looking for a new source of the country's mineral wealth, but workers digging for an arguably more precious resource: water.

Private boreholes - like this one being excavated in Garsfontein - are springing up across the wealthier neighbourhoods in the country's economic heartland, where taps have been running dry.

"I am tired of not knowing when we will have water and when we won't," the frustrated homeowner says.

"Having a borehole means we won't have to depend on the government so much, it's what's best for my family."

Much of the domestic water supply here depends on electricity to pump it from the source to the vast high plain on which the cities of Johannesburg and Pretoria sit.

South Africa's recent **electricity woes** - with regular lengthy scheduled blackouts - have had a knock-on effect on the supply of water.

"All of our stations, they need electricity, they need power. You have to pump water everywhere where it is needed," says Sipho Mosai, the head of state-owned Rand Water, one of the country's main water providers.

"Electricity is really at the heartbeat of what we do and if we don't have it externally, at least for now, it becomes a problem."

"Some days I don't have both water and electricity, and this can be for days at a time. It makes daily life insufferable," says Zizi Dlanga, a 35-year-old private wealth manager.

She lives in a two-bedroom apartment in an affluent suburb in the north of Johannesburg with her sister who is a trainee doctor. She now stocks up on water when it is available and goes to a gym to take a shower.

"My water bill stays the same even with all the cuts. I feel frustrated, I don't have access to water alternatives [like a borehole] that would make this bearable for me," she adds.





just one aspect of a multi-pronged problem facing the water industry.

"We are in a state of systemic failure, the water sector is collapsing," expert Prof Anthony Turton tells the BBC.

The lack of electricity has exacerbated issues created by poorly maintained infrastructure, which has led to vast leaks as well as sewage problems, and a supply of water that cannot meet demand.

Seventy million litres of treated, clean, drinkable water are lost every single day because of leaks that are endemic in the crumbling water system.

Most of the water wastage identified has been linked to badly run municipalities that are not investing in maintenance, partly because of corruption and theft.

This has also meant that sewage plants are not cleaning the water in the way that they should.

And this has had public health consequences.



Lawrence Malope has been selling bottled water in Hammanskraal after people became nervous about the piped water

In just a few weeks in Hammanskraal, a township outside Pretoria, 29 people were killed by cholera that had been found in the water supply there. The outbreak has been linked to substandard water purification practices.

Lawrence Malope sells bottled water at the roadside in the township. It is a new business born out of desperate times.

"Most people buy from me because they want safe water to drink, because the water that comes out of the taps is dirty," he says.

At home, he collects rainwater and then boils it before use.

"Many people are getting sick here because of the water coming out of our taps and some just don't know how to clean it. We have young children in this community, I'm really worried about our safety," he says.

But not having clean drinking water is not unique to Hammanskraal - a recent report by the department of water affairs and sanitation found that of the 155 treatment systems sampled, 41% came back showing bad microbial water quality compliance.

The problem can be found across the country. In the Eastern Cape's quaint arts town of Makhanda, formerly known as Grahamstown, residents have for years been forced to contend with unsafe drinking water, with recurring bouts of E.coli contamination.

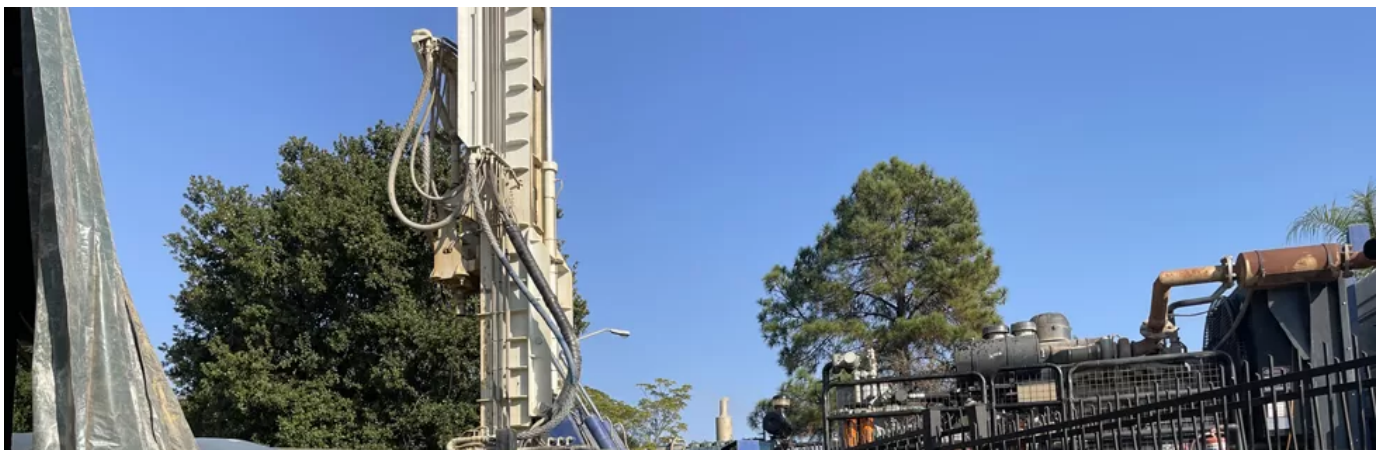
In the Free State province, government investigations found that the majority of wastewater treatment plants are deemed to be "in critical condition", putting residents at risk of contaminated water.

For Prof Turton, the combination of problems with water and electricity supplies is creating a perfect storm.

"People living all across the country are becoming increasingly concerned and increasingly angry. Part of it is because people are sitting in darkness sometimes.

"With the interrupted water supply... we now have a situation where people are literally dying from disease."

On the part of the water suppliers, Mr Mosai from Rand Water agrees that more needs to be done. He says that his company is investing in solar power rather than relying on the national grid.





don't have. It creates social injustice," argues Dr Ferrial Adam from advocacy group WaterCAN.

There are also questions about the environmental impact of boreholes and whether the groundwater is safe to drink. In some parts of the country, harmful metals and dangerous bacteria can be found in the water.

But experts say there are some things that can be done to benefit everyone and help arrest the deterioration of the water supply.

"There are some very quick fixes," according to Dr Adam.

"One is fix the leaks, spend actual money on infrastructure and maintenance, and test water regularly, so you monitor what people are being made to drink."

She adds that the national government needs to be better at keeping municipalities in line.

The government acknowledges the problem and says it has taken some municipalities to court over allegations of negligence.

But Dr Adam feels that is not enough.

"A lot of these are failing. That failure places lives at risk."

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