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Italy recovering from big blackout

ROME, Italy (CNN) --Italy is recovering from a nationwide power blackout which hit virtually the whole population in the dead of night, unleashing chaos, stalling lifts and stranding travelers.

Three deaths were unofficially attributed to the outage: a man killed in a traffic accident at an intersection where the lights had failed, and two elderly woman who fell down stairs in the dark in separate cases.

Almost all of the country's 57 million people were affected -- more than in last month's collapse in the U.S. Northeast and Canada. But coming on a weekend night its initial impact was less dramatic and caused less economic damage.

The problem was blamed on a series of failures on power lines from Switzerland and France in bad weather -- and a tree felled by the storms.

Mobile phone links were badly hit and some newspapers were unable to publish.

About 110 trains carrying more than 30,000 passengers were stranded when the power went out. Trains were held at the Swiss border for more than 3-1/2 hours before power returned.

First reports of the blackout came at about 3:30 a.m. local time (0130 GMT). Officials told CNN the entire country -- with the exception of the island of Sardinia -- lost power at some point.

Officials first blamed it on the breakdown of two big lines from France, which provides critical supplies and up to a fifth of Italy's needs at night, during severe storms.

But they later said lines from Switzerland and Austria also failed, apparently helping to trigger the blackout, which also briefly hit an adjacent Swiss region.

"It was an exceptional, extraordinary event," Andrea Bollino, chairman of Italy's grid operator GRTN, told Reuters.

France's grid operator RTE said the blackout started with four successive line failures between Switzerland and Italy.

Tree blamed

A spokesman for ATEL, one of Switzerland's biggest electricity providers, said a tree uprooted by strong winds knocked out a Swiss transmission line to Italy.

Officials reported eight hours later that electricity had been restored to 90 percent of the country.

Emergency services said the timing of the outage -- early in the morning with most of the country asleep -- meant there were few if any casualties.

Hospitals and other emergency centers were operating using reserve power generators.

The blackout did however bring an early end to an all-night street party in Rome where shops, restaurants, tourist sites and museums were supposed to stay open until daybreak.

Heavy rain had already brought a halt to several events in the "White Night" festival and the power outage left many partygoers stranded and wet with others stuck in the city's disabled subway system.

The Italian blackout comes on the heels of other major outages elsewhere in the world this year.

On August 14 a massive blackout swept the northern and eastern United States and parts of Canada, affecting 50 million people and

shutting down more than 100 power plants. ([Full story](#))


Two weeks later another outage hit London and parts of southeast England, disabling public transport at the height of the evening rush hour. ([Full story](#))

Italy was also hit with partial power cuts in June, when people -- suffering in the scorching summer -- overloaded the system with air conditioners and other electricity-guzzling appliances. That was the first time in more than 20 years that the national operator of the electrical grid ordered power cuts.

-- *CNN Rome Bureau Chief Alessio Vinci and CNN Italia's Eugenio Ciuccetti* contributed to this report

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