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## The World; COLUMN ONE; Caught in a Power Struggle; Electric company workers in Gaza go from heroes to enemies daily as they make the rounds to turn on or off the juice, which is scarce.

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### Document Text

In the course of his daily rounds, Abdel Hakim abu Jomaa has been soaked with buckets of water and showered with garbage. He's been pelted with rocks and menaced with assault rifles.

But the absolute worst was the day with the dogs.

Several weeks ago, he was up on a tower in Gaza City's Shajaiya neighborhood, preparing to shut off the area's electricity. A man tied two mean-looking dogs to the base of the tower and made him an offer he couldn't refuse.

"He said: 'If you turn it off, they stay here. If you leave it on, we'll take them home,'" Abu Jomaa recalled. "I left it on, of course, and got out of there."

The art of choosing battles is a basic survival skill for the 550 employees of the Gaza Electricity Distribution Co.

In late June, Israeli jets destroyed the power station that provided more than 40% of the Gaza Strip's electricity after militants killed two Israeli soldiers and captured a third. Since then, electrical workers have tried to stretch the remaining power supply, purchased from Israel, through rolling blackouts.

Three times a day -- at 8 a.m., 4 p.m. and midnight -- teams fan out to flip the switches on hundreds of transformers, bringing electricity to districts that have been without for eight hours and shutting off power to others.

"People either can't wait for us to arrive or don't want to see us coming," worker Wael Jundeya said. "It depends what time it is."

The workers have become targets for the anger of 1.4 million Gazans. Every stop is a potential fight, and fending off abuse is the routine.

"It's become their full-time job," said the utility company's general manager, Sulaiman abu Samhadana, who calls his employees "the most oppressed people in the Middle East."

(The only upside of the job? The firm is private sector, so unlike most Gazan civil servants, the workers have been getting paid lately -- about \$400 a month.)

When the battered blue van carrying Jundeya, Hossam Berberi and supervisor Ahmed Wali arrived to shut off the transformer in the Shaaf neighborhood on a recent day, a workshop owner approached and pleaded for "just five more minutes."

"I'm not asking for the impossible. Just give us the full eight hours."

"Other people are waiting for their electricity, ya hagg," Jundeya replied, employing a common Arab honorific and trying to keep the temperature down.

They flipped the switch at the base of the tower with a screeching clang but didn't take the extra step of climbing up and disconnecting the transformer fuses. Then they drove off, with the man still yelling.

Ten minutes later, the crew members came back to confirm their expectations: The man had broken the lock holding the switch in place and turned the power back on.

When he saw them coming, the man grabbed a shovel and waved it as he strode toward the van.

"I asked for five minutes and you refused!" he shouted. "Now I'll take 10 minutes whether you like it or not."

The workers shifted into diplomatic mode, and a deal was quickly struck. They would give him time to complete a welding project. Jundeya and Berberi accompanied the man to his office, where he treated them to sodas.

"Sometimes you just have to let the residents win," said Wali, the supervisor. "You have to respect their circumstances."

In addition to fending off endless complaints and occasional threats, the workers wage a daily struggle against a community of increasingly creative amateur electricians.

"They do more work on the boxes than we do," Abu Jomaa said.

At the beginning of the power shortage, the workers only flipped the switch at the base of each tower. Residents figured it out after two or three days, Wali said. Then the workers started climbing the towers and disconnecting the decks of fist-sized fuses. But the residents climbed the towers and figured out how to reconnect the fuses. Finally, the crews resorted to taking the fuses away from certain neighborhoods.

It's a nonstop battle of wits and wills, one the employees seemed resigned to mostly losing.

Abu Jomaa estimated that the switches on 15% of the towers were turned on hours before workers arrived. But on that day, it seemed more like 40%. And it might have been even higher.

The residents know what time the crews will come. They switch the electricity on again after the workers leave, then sometimes switch it off just before the next crew arrives.

The street-corner tinkering is more than just an annoyance. If too many neighborhoods switch the electricity on when they're not supposed to, demand can overload the system and shut down huge chunks of the power grid.

Neighborhood tampering also can be deadly for the workers. In July, Mohammed Ghouli was electrocuted when residents in a nearby neighborhood turned on the power while he was performing maintenance on a tower. His picture now hangs in the company offices and on the windows of the teams' vans, along with the inscription "Martyred while carrying out his duties to his people and his country."

Workers consider the Shaaf neighborhood a short-straw assignment. The area is notorious as a warren of twisting, tightly packed streets with lots of angry people and no easy escape if things get ugly.

And things often do. On a hot day in August, Shaaf residents who expected power at 8 a.m. didn't get it until 2 p.m. because of technical problems on the Israeli end -- and then the power was on for only a few hours. The next morning brought another complication for the crew: Its van broke down, and it took 45 minutes to get a replacement.

Gazans have developed a heightened sensitivity for who is getting electricity, when and for how long. Everybody wants their fair share, and then some. The workers know they'll pay the price out on the street for both the blackout and the tardiness.

At one stop, the van was swamped before it stopped moving.

"We've always kept the young guys away from the switch!" a red-faced man yelled. "But after what you've done, we'll let them!"

One team member shot back: "Shame on you! This is the first day we've ever been late."

At another intersection, a man in a green-striped robe approached with a familiar stream of complaints. It started out friendly but soon turned heated as other residents joined in and crowded around the van.

One man ranted about how the blackouts also shut down the electric pumps that most Gazan homes depend on for water.

"A man can't take a shower! He can't wash his face!" he shouted.

"How is anyone supposed to organize their life?"

This was getting off easy. Several weeks before at the same intersection, two cars full of armed men blocked the van and fired at the workers' feet. All escaped without injury, but a series of such incidents prompted the electric company to beef up security.

Armed guards now protect the main office, and police have been called out 10 times to accompany the crews into dangerous neighborhoods.

Still, despite the confrontations, the morning route through Shaaf was mostly a happy run. The workers were relaxed. In the morning, they were bringing electricity, not taking it away.

Residents in most areas welcomed them with open arms, big smiles and offers of tea. As they left one neighborhood, the ceiling fans in a furniture workshop and at a falafel stand started rotating again.

That afternoon, the mood changed dramatically -- they were turning off the power at most of the stops. There was no dawdling, no fielding complaints and no tea. They jumped out of the van, flipped switches, pulled fuses and tore away.

Jundeya half-shouted, "Go! Go! Go!" when a man approached the van. He didn't want to risk getting caught for too long in one place.

The crews relaxed when they pulled up in front of headquarters.

"Welcome home safely!" shouted a laughing security guard armed with an assault rifle, hunting knife and grenade.

They hardly noticed the angry man outside the office.

"My store is right in front of the transformer!" he shouted at a supervisor.

"If I see anyone come near it to turn off the power, I'm going to string him up and shoot him."

\*

ashraf.khalil@latimes.com

Credit: Times Staff Writer

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