

## Havana without gasoline: How Trump's oil blockade is crippling everyday life in Cuba



*Two residents of Havana report on how the fuel shortage has changed their lives (photo: Bert Hoffmann)*

When the power goes out in Fernando's neighborhood in Havana, it's not just the lights that go out. "Telephony in my area is digital," explains former *BBC* correspondent Fernando Ravensberg, who has lived in Havana since 1997. "When the batteries in the transmission towers run out, we are left without light, without telephone, and without internet. In the event of a medical emergency or a fire, we don't even have the option of calling an ambulance or the fire department." This affects him for around 12 hours a day, while in other provinces the power is often out for much longer.

The effects of the [US oil embargo](#) now permeate every aspect of everyday life in Cuba. Venezuela, once the most important supplier, had to suspend its oil deliveries in mid-December. Mexico also stopped shipments after the US government threatened to impose tariffs on countries that supply Cuba. In addition, the US has deliberately intercepted shipments that Cuba had purchased on the free market. The Trump administration is thus apparently pursuing a strategy of regime change by deliberately causing a humanitarian catastrophe.

On February 6, the government announced [emergency measures and drastic rationing](#), with which the socialist island republic intends to use the available fuel as efficiently as possible.



*Many streets in Havana are empty, with significantly reduced traffic (photo: Bert Hoffmann)*

## **When nothing runs anymore**

Traffic in the capital has fallen to less than half of normal levels, Ravensberg estimates. For the majority of his neighbors who do not own a car, this means considerable difficulties in getting to their jobs, educational institutions, or hospitals. Fuel prices on the black market are reaching extreme heights: a liter of gasoline costs up to six US dollars. Private shared taxis therefore charge the equivalent of five dollars for a trip of only three kilometers. For most Cubans, this is unaffordable.

There are also shortages at official gas stations. According to [reports](#) by the AP news agency, drivers sometimes have to wait several months for a refueling appointment. To avoid chaos, the Cuban government last week mandated the use of the “Ticket” app to obtain appointments. However, drivers in Havana reported that the app only assigns them appointments in several weeks or months. When they are finally allowed to refuel, they can only buy 20 liters. The sale of diesel to private individuals has been completely discontinued.

The lack of fuel deliveries has also paralyzed garbage collection. Of the 106 garbage trucks in Havana, only 44 were still operational before the rationing, [reported](#) the state news portal *Cubadebate*. By now, there are likely to be even fewer. At the street corner near Fernando's house, mountains of garbage now almost block the passage for vehicles. The piles of waste have become breeding grounds for rats, cockroaches, and mosquitoes – a serious health risk.

## **Universities practically closed**

Julián Gutierrez, who lives in Havana's southern suburb of Marianao, describes the situation as “massive immobility.” “The entire transport sector is almost completely at a standstill,” he says. “If you want to go somewhere, you have no way of getting there. People walk a lot.”

“The universities are practically closed,” reports Gutierrez. “Although I live near the technical university and can get there every day, they don't even prepare food there anymore.” For the pensioner and former university lecturer, the question of who is to blame is clear:

“It's not the government and it's not the system – it's the US blockade. And the problem won't be solved by aid deliveries. Anyone who really wants to help us must bring down the blockade.”

But people's willingness to suffer is waning. According to Gutierrez, the younger generation did not experience previous crises. For them, the current situation is new in its severity, despite the economic crisis of previous years.

## **Agricultural markets are emptying**

The fuel shortage is increasingly threatening the food supply. “The shortage of products from Cuban agriculture is already noticeable in the neighborhood: yuca, malanga, tomatoes, carrots, and onions,” Ravensberg describes. “The problem is that most of the private trucks that brought these products run on diesel, which is no longer sold due to Trump's oil embargo.”

Agricultural products are particularly important for the poorest Cubans, as they cannot afford the prices of food imported by small and medium-sized private companies (SMEs). A private bakery in the Vedado district had to close because it had no way of transporting flour from the port in Mariel, Ravensberg explains.



*Basic food supplies are still guaranteed in many places, but prices are rising (photo: Bert Hoffmann)*

The more expensive supermarkets in each neighborhood still have goods, Ravensberg reports. He believes they will hold out for a few more months. “However, if the fuel problem for transporting goods from the port to the city is not solved, there will be shortages.” Shipping companies that delivered goods door-to-door by truck are particularly affected. The well-known online retailer Supermercado23 [announced](#) last Friday that it would have to suspend its services due to the fuel shortage. For Cubans living abroad, it is now easier and cheaper to transfer money so that their families can buy food directly on site.

Gutierrez confirms that food retailers are still functioning. “There are goods in private stores. Sometimes more, sometimes less, but they are there. The problem is that everything is becoming more expensive. Prices are constantly rising.”

## Cooking with charcoal

Due to a lack of electricity and gas, more and more people are cooking with charcoal, reports Ravensberg. "Only those who live in areas with a city gas connection are currently unaffected. LPG or gas bottles have almost completely disappeared." There is a boom in the production of charcoal and wood-burning stoves, with instructions for building your own circulating as podcasts.

Charcoal is available in abundance, presumably because stocks that used to be exported can no longer be transported to the ports. Gutierrez has another explanation: "You can get charcoal because people are starting to make it themselves, but they sell it at a fairly high price."

## Impending disaster in the healthcare system

The most urgent need is for renewable energy facilities to maintain public health services, says Ravensberg. "Soon, incubators for newborns, dialysis machines, and cancer treatment equipment will run out of power, resulting in the deaths of many innocent people."

UN Secretary-General António Guterres is very concerned about the situation, said his spokesman Stéphane Dujarric. The United Nations has repeatedly called on the US to end the economic blockade that has been in place since 1960.

## International aid and solar energy

Spain [announced](#) that it would send humanitarian aid in the form of food and medical supplies through United Nations channels. This was announced by the Spanish Foreign Ministry after a meeting between the foreign ministers of both countries in Madrid. Mexico had already delivered 800 tons of humanitarian aid to Cuba. Two navy ships carrying relief supplies arrived in the Caribbean island nation last week.

Ravensberg sees a glimmer of hope in the current situation: the massive expansion of renewable energies. "The government is intensifying the construction of photovoltaic parks throughout the country. A few days ago, a record output of 900 megawatts was [achieved](#) during peak solar hours." Around 8,000 employees from the health and education sectors have [installed such](#) systems in their homes with the help of government loans. "All Cubans who have the financial means are also installing photovoltaic systems in their homes. In my neighborhood, there are already two places that sell panels and a hardware store that offers cables and other accessories for installation." But even that does not solve the logistics problem. Cuba is 100 percent dependent on imports for fuels such as diesel, gasoline, and kerosene.

Julián Gutierrez thanks the movements that collect donations and supply Cuba with relief goods. But his demand is clear: "The US blockade must be lifted. We must have the opportunity to develop on our own." Then it would become clear whether the socialist system is really any good or not. ([Cubaheute](#))