

Pyongyang off-grid systems

In this Sunday, Oct. 21, 2018 photo, smokes billows from the chimneys of Pyongyang Power Plant in Pyongyang, North Korea. Twenty years after his father almost bargained them away for a pair of nuclear reactors, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has his nuclear weapons - and a nation still plagued by chronic blackouts. But years of sanctions have spurred the North to cobble together a creative smorgasbord of alternative resources, some off the official grid and some flat-out illegal. (AP Photo/Dita Alangkara)

In this Oct. 21, 2018 photo, the 105-storey Ryugyong Hotel is illuminated in the night sky in Pyongyang, North Korea. Twenty years after his father almost bargained them away for a pair of nuclear reactors, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has his nuclear weapons - and a nation still plagued by chronic blackouts. But years of sanctions have spurred the North to cobble together a creative smorgasbord of alternative resources, some off the official grid and some flat-out illegal. (AP Photo/Dita Alangkara)

In this July 26, 2018 photo, a man sits at a showroom that sells imported cars in Pyongyang, North Korea. Twenty years after his father almost bargained them away for a pair of nuclear reactors, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has his nuclear weapons - and a nation still plagued by chronic blackouts. But years of sanctions have spurred the North to cobble together a creative smorgasbord of alternative resources, some off the official grid and some flat-out illegal. (AP Photo/Dita Alangkara)

PYONGYANG, North Korea (AP) -- More than 20 years after his father almost bargained them away for a pair of nuclear reactors, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has his nuclear weapons -- and a nation still plagued by chronic blackouts.

Even on the clearest days, plumes of smoke from two towering chimneys linger over the center of Pyongyang. The Soviet-era Pyongyang Combined Heat and Power Plant smokestacks are one of the North Korean capital's most recognizable landmarks.

If stalled nuclear talks with Washington ever get back on track, helping Kim solve his country's chronic energy deficit could be one of the biggest carrots President Trump has to offer. Washington, Seoul and Tokyo tried that back in the 1990s, and were even ready to pay for and build those two reactors Kim's father wanted.

Years of intensive sanctions have severely impacted North Korea's supply of fossil fuels from the outside world, but they also have spurred the country to cobble together a smorgasbord of energy resources, some of them off the grid and some of them flat-out illegal.

The whole nation of 25 million people uses about the same amount of electricity each year as Washington alone. It uses as much crude oil in a year as the U.S. consumes in just 12 hours. South Korea has about twice the population of the North, but its electricity consumption in 2014 was about 40 times bigger.

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That smoke-spewing power plant in the capital, which supplies much of the power and hot water needs for central Pyongyang, dates to the 1960s. Lights in the huge concrete apartment blocks of Tongil Boulevard across town stay lit thanks largely to the East Pyongyang Thermal Power Station -- built by the Soviet Union in the 1980s.

The showcase capital and cities near coal or hydroelectric power plants get the best coverage. Military facilities also take precedence and often have their own supply. So do important party and government operations, some of the higher-profile residences and hotels in the capital and even some restaurants. Lights used to illuminate portraits of the leaders at night never go out.

Still, it's not uncommon for the power even in many higher status locations to flicker on and off. Dancing beams of flashlights are commonplace on the streets or in otherwise darkened apartments. In rural villages, even that often fades to black.

The China-North Korea "Friendship Oil Pipeline" runs from the border city of Dandong under the Yalu River to a storage facility on the North Korean side about 13 kilometers (10 miles) outside the city of Sinuiju. From there, some is sent across country by truck or rail to the east coast, where it is stored at the port of Munchon. More is transported to Pyongyang for priority recipients such as the military, government departments and state enterprises, and to the port of Nampo, southwest of Pyongyang.

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