

'Day Zero': Water shut-off looms in South Africa's Cape Town

January 26 2018, by Christopher Torchia



People queue to collect water from a natural spring in the Cape Town, South Africa, suburb of St. James, Saturday Jan. 20, 2018. Tourists in the city famously perched near two oceans are being asked to flush the toilet as little as possible and swim in the ocean instead of pools "and maybe even spare yourself a shower", as a harsh drought may force South Africa's showcase city to turn off most taps. (AP Photo)

Long lines of South Africans collect water daily from a natural spring pipeline in an upscale suburb of Cape Town, illustrating the harsh impact

of a drought that authorities say could force the closure of most taps in the country's second largest city in just over two months, an occasion ominously known as "Day Zero."

The prospect that large sections of South Africa's showcase city, famously perched near two oceans, might go without running water has induced anxiety as well as resolve among its nearly 4 million residents. It has attracted scrutiny from scientists and city managers worldwide who also face the dual challenge of ballooning populations and shrinking resources. This would be the world's first major city to go dry.

"There are a lot of people who have been in denial and now they suddenly realize this is for real," said Shirley Curry, who waited to fill a plastic container with spring water from one of several taps outside a South African Breweries facility in the Newlands suburb.

Security guards made sure people took only an allotted amount (25 liters maximum in one line and 15 liters in another "express" line). However, things were more freewheeling at a nearby spring water source with no oversight. Mayor Patricia de Lille this month threatened to fine those who use too much water and said the city can no longer ask people to comply: "We must force them."



Cape Town's main water supply from the Theewaterskloof dam outside Grabouw, Cape Town, South Africa, Tuesday, Jan. 23, 2018. A harsh drought may force South Africa's showcase city of Cape Town to turn off most of its taps, as the day that the city runs out of water, ominously known as "Day Zero", moves ever closer for the nearly 4 million residents. (AP Photo)

The spectacle of people scrounging for water could become more common as "Day Zero" approaches in Cape Town, whose natural beauty has made it a coveted spot for international visitors. While the city urges people to restrict water usage, many living in poor areas already have limited access to water. They use communal taps in gritty neighborhoods such as Blue Downs on the Cape Flats, where people washed clothes outside and carried buckets of water to shack dwellings on a recent afternoon.

Cape Town's leaders have instructed residents to use only 50 liters of water daily from Feb. 1, down from the current 87-liter limit. "Day Zero" is projected to arrive on April 12 but some fear it could come

sooner, while others hope it won't happen if rationing works and rains eventually come.

If "Day Zero" arrives, many people would have to go to collection points for a daily ration of 25 liters. Taps would continue to run in hospitals and provisions would be made for schools, some of which can pump water from boreholes. Communal taps in poor areas known as informal settlements likely would run to avoid the threat of disease. Some central and downtown areas could be exempt from the cut-off for the sake of tourism and business.



People collect water from a communal tap at an informal settlement near Cape Town, South Africa, Tuesday, Jan. 23, 2018, as a harsh drought may force South Africa's showcase city of Cape Town to turn off most of its taps. While the city urges people to restrict water usage, many living in poor areas already have limited access to water, and the day that the city runs out of water, ominously known as "Day Zero", moves ever closer for the nearly 4 million residents. (AP Photo)

While tourists are still welcome, tourism authorities urge them to flush the toilet as little as possible and "take a dip in the ocean instead of swimming pools, and maybe even spare yourself a shower."

The water crisis is propelling Cape Town into the unknown, but the causes have been brewing for a while. Since around the end of white minority rule in 1994, the population has soared by about 80 percent, straining municipal infrastructure. Meanwhile, the region has endured several years of drought. Scientists at the University of Cape Town say man-made global warming may have contributed to the severe weather, and that similar droughts could be more common in the future.

The average level of reservoirs that are Cape Town's main water source is currently about 27 percent, but the final 10 percent is considered unusable because of mud, weeds and debris at the bottom. Some residents are already complaining that silt in tap water makes it undrinkable. The city says it would have to turn off most taps if the average reservoir level falls below 13.5 percent.



A communal tap runs as people collect water in an informal settlement near Cape Town, South Africa, Tuesday, Jan. 23, 2018. While the city urges people to restrict water usage, many living in poor areas already have limited access to water, and the day that the city runs out of water, ominously known as "Day Zero", moves ever closer for the nearly 4 million residents. (AP Photo)

Theewaterskloof Dam, whose reservoir was once the city's biggest provider, is a startling sight. Large areas consist of sand and cracked earth. Boats used to moor against tires embedded in a wall near a yacht club, but now the water line is so low that the clubhouse is far from the dwindling lake.

"This is a natural disaster of immense proportions," said Mmusi Maimane, leader of the Democratic Alliance, an opposition party that runs Cape Town and the surrounding Western Cape province.

The party says the national government, run by the ruling African

National Congress party, has failed to deliver water to all municipalities as required by law. Nomvula Mokonyane, the water and sanitation minister, counters that the city should do more to crack down on people using too much water.



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For now, Cape Town residents are advised to limit showers to fewer than 90 seconds and use a bucket to collect the runoff and flush the toilet.

Noel Borman, a resident collecting water, was asked about "Day Zero," if it comes.

"I don't even want to be here," he said.



People queue to collect water from a natural spring outlet in the Cape Town, South Africa, suburb of St. James, Saturday Jan. 20, 2018. Tourists in the city famously perched near two oceans are being asked to flush the toilet as little as possible and swim in the ocean instead of pools "and maybe even spare yourself a shower", as a harsh drought may force South Africa's showcase city to turn off most taps. (AP Photo)



Cape Town's main water supply is running dry, at the Theewaterskloof dam outside Grabouw, Cape Town, South Africa, Tuesday, Jan. 23, 2018. A harsh drought may force South Africa's showcase city of Cape Town to turn off most of its taps, as the day that the city runs out of water, ominously known as "Day Zero", moves ever closer for the nearly 4 million residents.(AP Photo)



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People queue to collect water from a natural spring outlet in the South African Breweries in Cape Town, Tuesday Jan. 23, 2018. Tourists in the city famously perched near two oceans are being asked to flush the toilet as little as possible and swim in the ocean instead of pools "and maybe even spare yourself a shower", as a harsh drought may force South Africa's showcase city to turn off most taps.(AP Photo)



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