Thieves fry Kenya's power grid for fast food

Vandals smash electrical transformers to steal viscous fluid that's later sold as cooking oil for roadside stalls.

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Nairobi, Kenya - The morning scene is increasingly routine for Kenyans. When it's time to start the day, the power is already out. Somewhere nearby, the shell of a wrecked electrical transformer lies on its side underneath the pole where it had been fixed seven metres off the ground.

The culprit is an unusual one: A vandal who is selling the toxic oil, drawn from the transformer, to chefs who use it for frying food in roadside stalls. Five litres of the viscous, PCB-laden liquid sells for $60. It looks like cooking oil, but lasts much longer, users say.

Kenyan's appetite for fried food and cheap frying oil is stalling the country's urgent efforts to build a modern electrical grid, even as it sows the seeds of a public health crisis, experts say.

And with utility companies reporting similar vandalism across East Africa and as far away as South Africa and Nigeria, the crime spree is becoming another thorn in ambitious plans to electrify Africa.

Sudden blackouts darken businesses and communities across Africa. In a continent where 70 percent of Africans are not yet connected to grid electricity, the World Bank says even those manufacturers who do have a connection lose 56 days a year, on average, to blackouts.

Such power losses can cut revenues as much as 20 percent for businesses that can't easily use or afford backup generators, World Bank said.

Even companies that don't experience blackouts are likely to suffer as utilities pass on the price of continually replacing transformers.

In 2012, replacing transformers cost Kenya Power $4m, about seven percent of its net profit, according to Kevin Sang, a communications officer for the company. Umeme Uganda, a power distributor, had to spend $2m this year, said Patrick Mwesigwa, the company's chief financial officer.

One big problem is that the oil that cools electrical transformers is also great for frying cassava, chips and fish. Other than fuel, thieves tout it as a "remedy" for wounds, and even to make cosmetics, said Tom Muhumuza, a senior project manager for Fersdult Engineering Services, a Ugandan firm that deals with energy projects.

The copper wire from transformers is sold to fix motors and as scrap metal, which enters the global market and can end up as far away as India and China, Muhumuza said.

Kenya represents the problem in microcosm. On paper, its goals for electrification seem promising: It's sub-Saharan Africa's fifth biggest economy, according to the World Bank, with better infrastructure than most. Kenya Power Ltd aims to bring electricity to 70 percent of all Kenyans within five years, up from the current 35 percent.

Kenya has even had some success fighting transformer vandalism. In 2013, 535 transformers were vandalised across the country, a stark drop from 898 in 2011, according to Kenya Power. That may be due to a 2013 law that imposes a minimum 10-year jail sentence on transformer vandals.

Kenya Power has also started mounting transformers in more inaccessible places, such as inside homes and much higher up on poles.

But that's no comfort to Barnabas Ikahu, who runs a small printing company to supplement his income as a teacher in Kaheho, a town 200km northwest of Nairobi.

Ikahu's plant churns out calendars, business cards, wedding invitations and photocopying and is typical of the small businesses that are the backbone of Africa's economic growth. His business stops every time the power goes out.

He's thinking of buying a generator to keep things going, but that would cost around $300 - enough to erase most of his profit when combined with the costs of generator fuel.

Even generators aren't a possibility for Nderitu Miano, a welder based 30km away from Kaheho, because the machines he uses to fix farm equipment or car parts suck more power than he can get from the type of small generator he could afford.

When the power goes out, "everything stops", he said. Customers, many of whom don't have electricity at all,
Within hours of the power going out, transformer oil can end up on the street, where it creates another health and environmental problem because it contains highly toxic polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs). The United States banned PCBs in 1979.

"Consumption of PCB-laden chips poses a health risk to Kenyans in a country where health services are already underfunded and doctors are in short supply," said Dr Esther Maina a biochemist at the University of Nairobi. But use of the oil is so widespread that she, herself, got sick from it when she bought chips at a roadside stand.

Kenya Power, the firm that distributes power in Kenya, is now thinking about building transformers that don’t use oil. Such transformers are not widely used and cost about half as much as ones that do use oil.

A version of this story first appeared on Thomson Reuters Foundation news service.

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Nderitu Miano
Esther Maina
Tom Muhumuza
Kevin Sang
Patrick Mwesigwa

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Thieves fry Kenya’s power grid for fast food http://t.co/WB18pcV1Zo via @AJEnglish
Now, this is poverty! Kenya-transformer fluid used for frying food in stalls. http://t.co/lBOHw4WaYI
#auspol http://t.co/mTbZ7J3lks
Someone should kick this Aljazeera thing out of Africa. What story is this???? @AJazeera http://t.co/nyY3CK74Cn #FarewellFidel
@KenyaPowerLtd any chance you will talk about this? "Thieves fry Kenya’s power grid for fast food" http://t.co/xZ4slw6nnQ via @AJEnglish
Would you like #PCBs with that? Thieves fry #Kenya’s power grid for fast food http://t.co/Z4kqTC0d7F via @AJEnglish
http://t.co/8xB6hWO3b think I might give the chips a miss next time I’m in Nairobi @spartakussug @beewol @skaheru @pkahill How does one react to stuff like this though? #WeirdStuffKenyansDo http://t.co/FbH6ywYHm
Alternative futures Y11? Why Micro-generation may be better Thieves fry Kenya’s power grid for fast food http://t.co/dSCP0U8C0gT @AJEnglish
Thieves fry Kenya’s power grid for fast food - Features - Al Jazeera English http://t.co/jKykZi1IS Bloody hell!
Q&A: German journalist on surviving ISIL
Al Jazeera spoke to Jurgen Todenhoefer who embedded with ISIL fighters - and lived to tell about it.

Thieves fry Kenya's power grid for fast food
Vandals smash electrical transformers to steal viscous fluid that's later sold as cooking oil for roadside stalls.

After jail, Pussy Riot focuses on prisons
Russian feminist rockers fight system holding 700,000 - the world's largest per capita prison population after the US.

Mexicans fight back over their missing
Baja California - with its own grim history of disappeared people - finds a voice in the fight against violence.

Moses Nyota  ·  17 days ago
Aljazeera always portrays Africa in a very negative way.... You say "Five litres of the viscous, PCB-laden liquid sells for $60" At the current exchange rate, $60 = ksh 5400. 5 liters of cooking oil costs just ksh 700 to Ksh 1000 depending on brand and Location. Transformer vandalism in Kenya is real, but the Oil is used for cooling home-made WELDING MACHINES.............. please do some research before posting rubbish.

seannorthman  Moses Nyota  ·  16 days ago
Thanks for the extra / true information Moses. The media always sensationalizes and lies about stories, it's not just Al Jazeera. I actually read AJ because the British press is much worse.

RiverMikeRat  seannorthman  ·  8 days ago
Same with the US.

ardere  Moses Nyota  ·  16 days ago
"It looks like cooking oil, but lasts much longer, users say"

I'm not denying that they ALSO sell it to cool industrial equipment but why would they buy cheap oil for cooking every few months when they can spend a little more and get oil that lasts months on end?

Tarik  ardere  ·  3 days ago
Exactly! From an economics reference, it makes sense to buy transformer oil because it has a higher re-use rate than ordinary cooking oil.

Tarik  Moses Nyota  ·  3 days ago
First, I wish to attest to the fact that the accuracy of the article is, without any shred of doubt, pinpoint. I have been a victim of transformer-fried food and can mention many more who had a similar experience. Second, you are fundamentally wrong to base your argument on the prices of the two oils. Such a comparison wrongly implies that these oils burn at similar temperatures. What you fail to recognize is that different oils have different makeups. This difference in makeup affects differently the heating temperatures. Moreover, the difference in composition means that some oils can last through more batches of cooking while others break down after a couple of uses. A more justifiable comparison, therefore, is the re-use factor of the oils and not their prices per se. Third, it costs far less to fry the food with transformer oil than with vegetable oil. It is a simple fact that transformer oil burns several Celsius degrees hotter -at lower temperatures- than ordinary cooking oil. In other words, the food is cooked faster and thus involves a lesser energy cost.

valles  Moses Nyota  ·  16 days ago
A sensible letter at last -thank you Moses.
You remind me of a parent that has to enroll their kid in a new school every few months because all the other schools just "had it out" for their brat. It's still a continent in desperate need of human leadership.

What we cannot dismiss is the fact that most of our problems in Africa can be traced back to the colonialism and imperialism that arose from the scramble for the African continent. What is frustrating, however, is when we keep on tying all our problems today to this past. Now we blame neo-colonialism on the familiar woes of Africa such as high infant mortality, corruption, population explosion, low life expectancy, poverty, AIDS, famine and so on. You are dead right that Africa is " in desperate need of human leadership."

i do not know much about Africa

kkkk they count words, they don't count facts. hell dump

This isn't just an African issue. There was a case in Europe where criminal gangs sold jet fuel as cooking oil. It resulted in many people dying and many more becoming very ill. I would say damaged transformers are the least concern. The major concern is the people being poisoned by eating food cooked in that viscous liquid.

That's a concern?

Please provide links to reputable sources that will confirm your statement about the jet fuel sales. Thanks

Weird story. The focus should be on the PCB poisoning of the citizenry but I guess powering your laptop is more important than the scores of human lives that will be destroyed with this practice. "facepalm humanity"

The lack of structural and economic development will kill far more Africans than PCB chips.

The focus is on a lot of issues, only one being PCB poisoning. The regulation that prevents such open vandalism is clearly not enforced properly. You get to the root of the problem and other smaller problems automatically disappear. In the developed world, we have the luxury of being able to live well and eat well. In the majority of the African subcontinent that is simply not the option. Power is indeed treated as a precious commodity. More than probably the nutrition intake of citizenry.
KingMenes → globetrotterrettorbolg - 7 days ago

"African subcontinent"? Africa is a continent, the second largest on earth.

Realist → KingMenes - 4 days ago

Okay....ever read anything ?? Subcontinent has been the term used for years to describe the continental portion that exists south of the Sahara.....a completely different place than the north...where those living in the USA pathetically claim their origination rather than DNA validates that the subcontinent as the verifiable homeland of African Americans....

KingMenes → Realist - 3 days ago

The African continent is the second largest continent on earth with the second largest population on the same earth and the whole of US can fit inside Sahara desert in Africa. That "subcontinent" thing is a creation of a racist imbecile society that knows nothing outside its borders.

Realist → KingMenes - 3 days ago

It's a geological reality like oceans mountain ranges, and deserts on every continent......natural barriers.... which have affected and determined climate, migration, animal species, and adaptive culture, etc. throughout history....your response is absurd and deflective.

KingMenes → Realist - 3 days ago

Then keep your ignorance and your "American subcontinent", just like you have kept the "African subcontinent" in your head.

globetrotterrettorbolg → KingMenes - 7 days ago

Yep. I stand corrected.

Thanks for pointing it out :)”

RiverMikeRat → KingMenes - 6 days ago

Except "African subcontinent" has been used for decades.

KingMenes → RiverMikeRat - 5 days ago

That is being mediocre.

RiverMikeRat → KingMenes - 4 days ago

It's being honest. There's a difference.

KingMenes → RiverMikeRat - 3 days ago

I am referring to the imbeciles who think the second largest continent on earth is a subcontinent. If that is the case, then small continents like Europe and North America are just Islands in the oceans.

wa Murugi → KingMenes - 3 days ago

spot on
not to put too bad a spin on it. Obama demands this and pictures of smiling 'blacks' everywhere.

Couldn't resist a childish dig, could you?

you would think

The oil is mostly sold to be used for cooling in welding machines and other industrial applications. Why would anyone risk his life just to get cooking oil when it is all over and very cheap. Al Jazeera has a way of trying to make Africans look more stupid than they are. Keep up the good work.

sorry, it is impossible for them to be portrayed as more stupid than they are!!

Show your face Mr Intelligent. The acts of desperation seen in Africa are directly related to the mean economic policies sponsored by your people, four centuries of exploitation, and sponsoring wars in Africa to keep it forever destabilized. I find it stupid for anyone to think that a whole population could simply be dismissed as stupid.

Stop blaming the white man for everything. You sound like Mugabe. There are many ex-colonies in the world doing just fine except for those in Africa. Can the massacres, tribal violence, extreme corruption, under development etc etc etc. really be blamed on the whitey? Or are you just afraid to own up for your people's problems?

Um, because it lasts longer? Simple math:
If you can buy something for $60 and it lasts for, say, 4 months, why would you buy something that costs half as much ($30) but lasts only a month? You'd have to spend $120 to have the supply that $60 would have bought.

I appreciate your math Sir. But my argument is not pegged on the economic sense of transformer oil Vs. cooking oil. No. I'm more concerned with the logic of stealing the oil so as to sell to poor roadside stalls. There is a certain amount of skills needed, plus the danger, hefty fines and lengthy jail terms one risks.

A more logical argument will be the use of the transformer oil in locally artisan-made welding machines (and that's what happens).

Fact: Most of our welding machines are locally manufactured and they use the same oil for transformer cooling. I'm sure you've seen the signs all over.
the same oil as transformers to cool (I guess they use the same principle to work). While local artisans can easily source components needed to make welding machines, it becomes a challenge to source for the oil needed to cool the machines. Which kinda makes sense for thieves to drain transformers and make some cash satisfying the need.

Notwithstanding that the use of the maths is not entirely accurate, I am afraid @RiverMikeRat is right. What you fail to recognize is the fact that different oils have different makeups. This difference in makeup affects differently the heating temperatures. Moreover, this difference in composition means that some oils can last through more batches of cooking while others break down after a couple of uses. What is of importance here, therefore, is the re-use factor of the oils and not their prices per se. Also, it costs far less to fry the food with transformer oil than with vegetable oil. It is a simple fact that transformer oil burns several Celsius degrees hotter -at lower temperatures- than ordinary cooking oil. In other words, the food is cooked faster and thus involves a lesser energy cost. See the logic of why the chefs would prefer transformer oil over ordinary cooking oil?

You say that the law is "s very punitive on this type of crime" and "doubt anyone would be motivated enough to vandalize a transformer...". Then you don't live in Africa

China is raping Africa for resources like everyone else.

Don't fool yourself. China is just as self-serving, if not more so, than the West. They just don't do it with bullets and bombs.

There is real progress on the ground as we speak. They offer development in return for minerals, which they buy at a fair price. Not sustaining wars like in DRC Congo where 5.4 million people have died in a conflict sanctioned by the West so that it can keep stealing coltan, Gold, diamond and other resources.

Isn't the west toppling legitimately elected leaders so as to install puppets who will help them siphon resources.

What role has the west played in the conflict in Somalia?
What was the role of the West in the decades long war in Angola and who is Angola largest trading partner now that they have peace? And how much have they progressed for the short period they have been at peace? Who engineered the Arab Spring? And what is the state of nations like Libya now, compared to periods before the Arab spring?

China is a million times better because it doesn't see sense in killing people so as to access their resources.

Somalia? Absolutely zero.
Arabs engineered Arab Spring. Hence the name, Arab Spring.

Libya has a slightly less stable government, but it is also a much less violent and repressive government.
No. China doesn’t kill for resources. They undermine and subvert.

Michaelinlondon1234 → RiverMikeRat · 4 days ago
Somalia..US/UK/Pro Israel project and they have spent billions of our tax money on it.
I suspect “Arab spring” was also originated in one of the western capitals.
Libya...You are living in a fantasy world.
I am not commenting on China. As I have no idea as to what they are up to.
And I doubt you do either.

wa Murugi → RiverMikeRat · 3 days ago
Hey, the idea that it will last for up to 4, or even 2, months is pure balderdash. Unless if you have used it in your kitchen my good sir. And 5 litres of the legit stuff/cooking oil costs less than $6, which if it could go for a month means spending about $24. Aljazeera got it wrong on that particular one about fries, but you wouldn’t know that, would you?

RiverMikeRat → wa Murugi · 2 days ago
Honestly? No. I’m going solely on what I read regarding this issue. I’m not stupid or African. My time frames are hypothetical. I have no idea how long the stuff lasts or doesn’t. All I know for sure is the stuff is poisonous. My ex-wife’s grandfather worked for the power company for 25 years, mostly hanging PCB-laden transformers. It ended up killing him.

Craig Ralton → RiverMikeRat · 5 days ago
But what is meant by “lasts longer”? does it mean the regular oil becomes burned? If so, surely it is still better to use burned oil than PCB.

RiverMikeRat → Craig Ralton · 5 days ago
Yes, it would be. But you have to understand the health implications and these people probably don’t.

Lasts longer means it doesn’t break down as easily.

Tarik → RiverMikeRat · 3 days ago
Not really! They understand the health implications but don’t care. The problem is the mentality of man-eat-man society as the late Julius Nyerere of Tanzania once said.

RiverMikeRat → Tarik · 2 days ago
Ok. If true, I just learned something. Thank you, I appreciate when that happens.

Do you know whether the street vendors know what kind of oil they’re buying?

Tarik → RiverMikeRat · 2 days ago
Yes the street vendors know what kind of oil they are buying. It is true RiverMikeRat. I live in Kenya.