

# Venezuela asks more than 100 malls to close to save electricity

Officials say measure will help the country cope with problems due to a severe drought caused by El Niño, but malls are havens from violence for many people

Associated Press in Caracas, Venezuela

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Shops in malls across Venezuela have closed their doors early to comply with a government electricity rationing order.

Venezuela's socialist government is asking more than 100 malls to close or generate their own power four hours each day, from 1pm to 3pm and from 7pm to 9pm.

Dozens of mall workers and would-be shoppers waited out the closure at a shopping center in upscale Caracas Wednesday. They complained about the new policy, which comes amid a general economic breakdown that has led to chronic shortages and triple-digit inflation.

"I need my salary," fast food restaurant manager Yorgenis Tovar said. "I can't let myself become unemployed at this point, with everything getting so expensive."

Officials say the measure will help the economically embattled country cope with problems at hydroelectric plants due to a severe drought caused by the El Niño weather phenomenon

Malls have become a haven for Venezuelans as the country has become one of the most violent in the world. In many areas, they are also the only places to see movies.

Venezuela has grappled with blackouts for years, including one that took President Nicolas Maduro by surprise as he delivered a national address on live television. Caracas occasionally shuts down because of citywide loss of power and rural areas see regular rolling blackouts.

Electricity here is virtually free, giving Venezuelans little incentive to conserve.

The government tried a similar policy in 2010, but rolled it back after patrons put up stiff resistance. This time, many shoppers seem resigned.

"Nothing about this surprises me," teacher Rosa Velasquez said. "Every day now something happens to make life here worse."

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