

**E** — ECONOMY

# Fire shuts down key fuel storage facility in Matanzas

by **Johannes Werner** · August 6, 2022



Photo: Abdiel Bermúdez, TV Yumuri

CUBA STANDARD — Adding to Cuba's energy woes, a crude oil storage tank at the tanker base in the Bay of Matanzas caught fire and exploded on the evening of Aug. 5, spreading the fire and causing an explosion of a second tank. As of early Aug. 8, the toll reached one dead firefighter, with 14 more missing, and a total 125 injured persons, including reporters and officials, while hundreds more firefighters were struggling to get the situation under control.



The fire was triggered by lightning on the evening of Aug. 5 at one of the eight storage tanks that can hold 50,000 cubic meters of fuel each, according to official media. The first tank is located near the center of the facility. Hours later, an explosion ripped off the cover of that storage tank, and spread the fire to a neighboring tank, injuring firefighters and bystanders. The second tank exploded in the late evening hours of Aug. 7, painting the night sky red as far away as Havana's Malecón. The cover of a third tank was compromised in that explosion, the presidency tweeted the morning of Aug. 8. Later that day, state oil firm Cupet clarified that the cover of the third tank was blown off, and that the tank was on fire. A fourth tank that was empty was also damaged, according to official reports.

A dark smoke plume, visible on satellite shots, reached Havana and further west, prompting health authorities to urge people to stay indoors. Meteorologists predicted toxic rain.

As of Aug. 9, authorities said the center of the disaster area was accessible again, that the fourth tank was not destroyed by the flames, and that the remaining four storage tanks were safe. However, depending on wind and other weather conditions, the flames could spread again, officials warned, adding that fires will continue to burn for days.

According to [an international study](#), 150 of 480 fuel storage fires since the 1950s worldwide were confirmed as caused by lightning.

As the Cuban government was asking for international help to fight the fire, armed forces helicopters were cooling the facility by dousing it with water from Matanzas Bay. Foam can only be applied once the temperatures have been cooled down.

Help from Venezuela and Mexico in the shape of firefighters, helicopters, fireboats, chemicals and equipment was on its way as of the evening of Aug. 6. Aug. 9, a Mexican navy ship with a helicopter arrived at Matanzas Bay.



Photo: TV Yumuri

The United States has probably most expertise in responding to these kinds of fires, and there are agreements to cooperate on environmental threats and disasters, but hands-on help by the Biden administration did not materialize. On Aug. 7, Cuban Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, Carlos Fernández de Cossío, tweeted that the U.S. government “offered technical advice, a proposal already in the hands of specialists for proper coordination.” But on the afternoon of Aug. 8, the U.S. embassy in Havana tweeted it was “on standby in case Cuba requests humanitarian or technical assistance.”

Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez on Aug. 5 asked for foreign assistance in general; Mexico and Venezuela responded immediately and

without a specific request by Cuba.

ACERE, a U.S.-based organization in support of Cuba, circulated a petition asking the U.S. government to provide support. Jorge Fernandez, a pro-engagement activist and businessman in Philadelphia, lined up an experienced U.S. company that needed \$7 million to do the job. Fernandez, who says he has an OFAC license, apparently did not get a response from the State Department.

“Southward as well as northward, courage is called for,” said John McAuliff, a pro-engagement activist.

## Electricity trouble

Fuel and oil shipping operations at the Port of Matanzas are suspended; tankers and domestic



Photo: Ricardo López Hevia/Cubadebate



The nearby Antonio Guiteras thermoelectric power plant — Cuba's largest — was turned off mid-day Aug. 8; the Energy Ministry said it was due to lack of cooling water. It restarted on the morning of Aug. 9, but was taken offline again Aug. 10. The power plant had fuel reserves for 48 hours when pumping from the supertanker base stopped. The storage facility struck by lightning held 26,000 cubic meters of sulphur-heavy domestic crude oil, which is mostly used by the power plant.

Of the eight storage tanks, four are destroyed or unusable. The remaining four storage tanks, while intact, may have been compromised by the heat, according to experts.

State electric utility UNE has since announced daily power generation gaps between 800 and 1,200 megawatts, with extended blackouts.

Cubans have been living with rolling blackouts this summer, due to breakdowns and maintenance at aging power plants.

This is Cuba's second major disaster within weeks, after a gas explosion destroyed the Hotel Saratoga in Old Havana in May.



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