

Beijing orders end to power cuts

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Shi Jiantao in Beijing

Beijing has told local authorities not to cut power supplies in a last-ditch effort to meet a mandatory energy efficiency target, after widespread criticism of the blackouts.

Local governments in more than 20 provinces have been rationing power since July, affecting not only steel mills, cement plants and other high-emission industries, but also homes and hospitals.

Citing concerns about the adverse impact on people's living conditions and social stability, the National Development and Reform Commission issued an urgent circular last week saying that blackouts were not the right way to cut emissions and energy waste, Xinhua reported. "Sweeping power cuts have disrupted normal life and had negative social impact," it said.

The blackouts have been widely criticised and have sparked a debate on the mainland over the practicality of the energy efficiency target.

Beijing promised in 2006, as part of a five-year plan, to reduce energy consumption per unit of gross domestic product by 20 per cent by the end of this year.

But the ambitious campaign has suffered setbacks, with energy efficiency declining and energy-inten-

sive industries growing in the first six months of this year.

The commission issued a stern warning on Thursday, saying local governments should strike a balance between long-term goals and immediate interests and stop rationing power to homes, hospitals and public utilities. "Instead of the last-minute scramble, day-to-day work and an established mechanism is the crux of meeting energy saving and emission reduction goals," it said.

But analysts said the commission failed to tell local authorities what alternatives they had to hit the target.

Beijing-based analyst Yu Jie (喻捷) said drastic local measures such as blackouts were largely a result of Beijing's heightened political pressure in recent months.

The central government has ordered the closure of outdated and inefficient plants in a dozen energy-intensive sectors and threatened disciplinary action and dismissal for officials who fail to deliver on the target. More than 2,000 firms in the steel, coal, cement, aluminium, glass and other industries have been ordered to close old and obsolete facilities by the end of this month, according to the commission.

"Beijing's policies should be more consistent to avoid this kind of last-minute rush," she said.