

Cahora Bassa power finally fizzles out

By SIMON WILLSON
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POWER supplies to South Africa from Cahora Bassa hydroelectric project in Mozambique have been cut off for nearly three months and may have ceased altogether.

The total breakdown in the expensive and carefully-planned transmission network, linking the R435m dam on the Zambesi River with South Africa, highlights the importance of next week's government-level talks between Pretoria and Maputo.

Bringing the Cahora Bassa scheme back on stream is the goal of one of the four working groups in the talks.

The group discussing the dam will be chaired by the Director-General of the Department of Mineral and Energy Affairs, Dr Sarel du Plessis, and will include repre-

sentatives of the Electricity Supply Commission (Escom).

Escom said yesterday it had received no power from Cahora Bassa since October 28.

"Over the last three years the Cahora Bassa power supply has been very unreliable and may now have ceased altogether," an Escom spokesman said.

Escom originally signed a contract with the project's owners — a consortium based in Lisbon — under which the SA grid was allocated 1 373 MW.

The contract was suspended two years ago when serious interruptions occurred to the dam's own power supply.

"For the first three years of operation the Cahora Bassa power supply came through on a regular and firm basis. But since 1980 it has been unreliable," the Escom spokesman said.

In 1981 the rate of availability of Cahora Bassa power to the Escom grid stood at only 21,1%. In 1982 it fell to 16,4%. The 1983 figure is un-

likely to reach double figures.

Figures issued by the Central Statistical Services show that, after buying 708 gigawatt hours (1bn watts) outside SA in October no power was bought externally in November.

Nearly all electricity bought outside SA comes from Cahora Bassa.

Although Escom has expanded its domestic generating capacity since the Cahora Bassa supply came on stream, the dam's contribution to SA's power supply next year could still be important.

With the task of meeting next winter's peak electricity demand in SA now demanding Escom's urgent attention, the inclusion of the Cahora Bassa scheme in the SA-Mozambique talks is timely.

Escom only just met last year's record demand of 15 639 MW without power cuts.

A full Cahora Bassa contribution of 1 373 MW to the Escom grid next winter would meet nearly 10% of peak demand.