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NEWSJAN 29 2018, 9:55 AM ET

Water crisis grips Cape Town, South Africa, after drought stretching years

by CATIE MONTEIRO



These tree trunks were submerged when the Theewaterskloof Dam in Villiersdorp, South Africa, was full. © Nic Bothma / EPA

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CAPE TOWN, South Africa — Buckets of gray water are scattered around Sitaara Stodel’s apartment: in the kitchen, in the bathroom, in the hallways and in her laundry room.

She uses water collected from her morning shower and the washing machine to flush the toilet and keep potted plants alive. To cut her water usage even further, Stodel has stopped shaving her legs and uses only a tiny amount to brush her teeth.

Her water-saving measures are becoming the norm in South Africa's second-largest city, which is in the midst of a years-long drought. Authorities warn Cape Town is less than three months away from the situation becoming so dire that it must shut off its taps, an eventuality known as "Day Zero."



Sitaara Stodel  Samantha Reinders / for NBC News

Based on current projections, "Day Zero" is forecast for April 12, according to officials. That would make Cape Town the world's first major city to run dry.

The prospect that large sections of South Africa's showcase city, which features a seafront and is famously perched not far from where the Atlantic and Indian Oceans meet, might have to cope without running water has induced anxiety as well as resolve among Cape Town's nearly 4 million residents.

"I'm constantly thinking about running out of water and worrying about 'Day Zero,'" Stodel, 26, said. "I'm even having nightmares about wasting water. The other day I had a dream that I took a long shower by mistake!"



A map showing the location of Cape Town, South Africa.  Bing Maps

From Feb. 1, Cape Town has told residents they can use no more than 13.2 gallons of drinking water a day in an effort to avoid "Day Zero." To put that in perspective, the average American uses an estimated 80 and 100 gallons of water daily, according to the U.S. Geological Survey.

If "Day Zero" does arrive, many people would have to go to collection points guarded by security forces for a daily ration of 6.6 gallons.

Taps would continue to run in hospitals and provisions would be made for schools, some of which can pump water from boreholes.

Communal taps in poor areas known as informal settlements — or shanty towns — likely would continue to run to avoid the threat of disease.



Cape Town residents are allowed to fill up one 6.6-gallon container at the Newlands Brewery natural water spring. 📷 Samantha Reinders / for NBC News

Some downtown areas could also be exempt and not cut off for the sake of tourism and business.

“I’m really scared now. It’s dry, dry, dry,” said housekeeper Petronella van Schalkwyk, who prides herself on coming up with inventive ways to save water.

She now baths in a plastic bucket and has moved her bathtub outside where it can catch water should it rain. To clean, van Schalkwyk uses two spray bottles, one with soap and one with water so she doesn’t have to fill a bucket.

“Many people tell me they think I’m crazy for doing all these things to save water at home. They just don’t see the reality of this problem,” she said from her employer’s house in Cape Town’s southern suburbs.



Petronella van Schalkwyk 📷 Samantha Reinders / for NBC News

But even with "Day Zero" looming, officials say 60 percent of Cape Town residents are still not complying with current restrictions.

"I think that there may be an apathy that's setting in and a savings fatigue, but we need to urge residents that further savings are still crucial," said Xanthea Limberg, a member of the mayoral committee for water oversight. "Our survival and livelihood depends on it."

The city is also monitoring households' water use and issuing fines to those that use too much.

Worried residents have taken to social media and started informing the city when they see someone breaking water restrictions.

No one knows how long the restrictions could remain in place if "Day Zero" comes. The WWF has warned residents to be prepared to live with little water for between three and six months, depending on rainfall in the areas that feed the city's dams.

The organization has put out fact sheets to help residents understand what "Day Zero" could look like and how to cope with it. It's encouraged residents to look after each other, and the elderly in particular.

It's also said that pit latrines and "alternate dry sanitation systems at home" may be necessary.

The water crisis is propelling Cape Town into the unknown, but the causes have been brewing for a while. Since around the end of white minority rule in 1994, the population has soared by about 80 percent, straining municipal infrastructure.



Cape Town's main water supply comes from the Theewaterskloof Dam outside Cape Town, which is running at extremely low levels. 📷 AP

Efforts to secure alternate sources of water have yet to be completed. Of the seven projects listed on the city's water dashboard, six are running behind schedule, and not one is more than 60 percent finished.

Both Stodel and van Schalkwyk are among those frustrated by what they see as a lack of concern among many residents.

“People are still watering their lawns, filling their pools and bathing. They seem happy to just pay the fines. It’s so upsetting,” Stodel said. “I think 'Day Zero' is inevitable, we’re at the point of no return. Cape Town will just have to deal with the consequences that day when it arrives.”

Rachel Elbaum contributed reporting from London.

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FIRST PUBLISHED JAN 29 2018, 8:29 AM ET

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