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### Throwing light on the blackout

WHEN North Americans suffered the largest power blackout in the history of the United States and Canada in the middle of last month, government and industry experts in Britain smugly declared that it could never happen there because contingencies had been studied and plans had been laid to prevent it from happening. But it did, barely two weeks later, much to the discomfiture of red-faced officials and the anger of hundreds of thousands of London commuters who were stranded by the blackout. And, of course, it happened here on Monday.

One consolation is the speed with which electricity was restored to the affected States and that "it could have been worse", in the words of Tenaga Nasional Berhad chairman Datuk Dr Awang Adek Hussin, "given the magnitude of the problem". The other consolation is that TNB does not seem to have suffered from the complacency which afflicted the British authorities. It seems to have learned from the massive power failures in 1992, 1996 and 1998 and instituted the emergency procedures and contingency plans that made possible the quick response to the shutdown.

Although TNB does not yet know what caused the outage, it goes without saying, as the Prime Minister has pointed out, that it must study the cause of the breakdown, and most importantly, ensure that it does not recur. The North American and London blackouts suggest, as Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said, that "our knowledge, and not ours alone, but everyone else's knowledge on electricity, is not adequate, because breakdowns keep occurring". TNB must live up to its chairman's vow to make it a "priority to improve its expertise in this area". The nation cannot risk its name being blackened in the eyes of investors because TNB cannot assure an uninterrupted supply of power. Needless to say, this also applies to the other utility providers. The prevention of breakdowns is not just a matter of operational procedures but also a matter of attitude. Although the time taken to restore power on Monday has been described by its chairman as "the best so far", the country's sole distributor of electricity must not rest on its laurels and allow a culture of complacency to creep in.