

Telecoms Developments in Africa

compiled by Matthew White, Iona Press Services

Algeria gets a third mobile operator

Algeria's Wataniya Telecom has launched a commercial network, Nedjma, making it the third mobile operator in the country. The organisation has announced plans to invest US\$320-million in the project and has set a goal of signing up two million users by the end of 2005. At launch the network covered the provinces of Algiers, Bournardes, Constantine, Oran and Tipazza. Algerian cellular penetration is estimated at about 5% of the population.

Angola's Unitel continues network rollout

Privately-owned Angolan cellphone operator Unitel reports that it has spent more than US\$4-million this year on expanding its network to the country's 18 provinces. Unitel executive Luciano Ferreira da Costa made the announcement at a ceremony to inaugurate the company's signal in Menongue, a town in the south-eastern Kuando-Kubango province. In the first phase of the regional project, some 2 300 subscribers will be connected within a 30 km radius. Unitel projects a customer base of 500 000 by the end of 2005.

Comoros seeking foreign investor for Telco

The military government of the Indian Ocean island state of Comoros has hived off telecoms operations from the state-owned postal services, filled the top posts with senior army officers and is now seeking to sell a minority stake to a foreign investor. Newly-renamed Comtel currently boasts about 12 300 lines in service. According to World Bank sources, documentation for the sale of a stake in Comtel is ready. There are also plans to auction a licence for a cellular operator.

New telecoms services aid Liberia's recovery

Libercell, one of four GSM operators in war-ravaged Liberia has launched internet and GSM services in Kakata, about 35 km from the capital, Monrovia, and in Tubmanburg, Bomi County. The country's development superintendent, John Bowah, has assured Libercell management of support, saying the introduction of this technology would bring development to the county.

Telkom Kenya privatisation may be stalled again

The on-off attempt to sell a stake in Telkom Kenya appears stalled again, according to local telecoms consultant John Walubengo. Writing in *The East African* (Nairobi), he says that even were an attractive package available from the donor community to pay for the retrenchment of 12 000 Telkom Kenya employees, such an exercise would not be politically expedient for a government facing elections. Despite this, Telkom SA has recently held talks with Kenyan authorities about the possibility of buying into Telkom Kenya.

Sierra Leone clears way for new mobile service

A new GSM operator, Lintel, is scheduled to commence telephone services in Sierra Leone in early February under the brand name Africell. The company has obtained an operating licence in the GSM 900 band with frequency ranges of 800-915 MHz and 935-960 MHz.

King Mswati acquires stake in Swazi MTN

King Mswati III, Africa's last absolute monarch, has acquired a 6% stake in MTN Swaziland for an undisclosed amount. The shares were apparently made to the king by state-owned Swaziland Posts & Telecommunications Corporation, which is entitled in terms of a joint-venture agreement to dispose of up to 21% of its shares free of any pre-emptive rights. MTN Swaziland reportedly has more than 116 000 subscribers, thus commanding more than 70% of the country's telecoms market, and has a cellphone penetration of 7.7%, higher than the local fixed-line network.

Tunisie Telecom to expand ADSL connection

Tunisie Telecom has announced plans to offer 22 000 additional ADSL connections in 2005 to satisfy growing demand for faster internet connections. Currently the state-owned telco operates 7 000 ADSL lines. It has a customer base of 2.6 million subscribers, including an estimated 46.1% of Tunisian households.

Ethiopia expands network

Ethiopia continues to make small strides with improving telecoms infrastructure. Recently the Ethiopian Telecommunication Corp. (ETC) announced that work has started on a US\$10-million wireless fixed-line telephone project being undertaken in collaboration with Huawei Technologies of China in the capital, Addis Ababa, and three other towns, Fitcha, Jimma and Wolkite. In another development, ETC announced it has selected Nokia to supply and deploy GSM network equipment in a contract valued at US\$48-million. The deal calls for Nokia and its main subcontractor, LeadCom Integrated Solutions, to supply both GSM core and radio equipment to upgrade part of ETC's existing network, mainly in Addis Ababa.

Guinea-Bissau's Eguitel defiant over VoIP telecentres

Despite uncertainty about the legal status of its VoIP operations in Guinea Bissau, telecoms company Eguitel is not merely continuing to operate the service but says it will go ahead with rollout of VoIP telecentres while attempting to settle its dispute with the country's telecoms regulator. Eguitel was granted a licence for unrestricted use of VoIP in October 2003. However the regulator subsequently attempted to cancel the licence, allegedly under pressure from state-owned former monopoly GuineTel, which is owned 51% by Portugal Telecom.

Broadband picks up steam in Mauritius

Competition to provide broadband services in Mauritius is hotting up with Mauritius Post subsidiary Clickpost and rival Telecom Plus both offering ADSL services and promising greater capacity at lower prices. Both organisations have announced they will reveal new 1 Mbps services early in 2005, which will push entry-level ADSL prices down. Telecom Plus will also unveil internet TV in February as part of a 128 kbps connection package.

Meanwhile a third provider, Network Plus, plans to launch Nomad, a wireless access for desktops and laptops, in February. And a fourth, Cellplus, has confirmed plans to introduce the third generation of mobile phones in 2005.