

ITU chief hails Kenya's fibre optic progress

By [Joyce Joan Wangui](#)

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The pace at which Kenya is moving in the laying of the long-awaited fibre optic cable is commendable. This was the remark of the Secretary General of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), Hamadoun Toure, during his visit to Kenya recently.

Toure who witnessed the unveiling of the fibre optic cable that will run from Kenya to Ethiopia referred to the project as 'timely' - adding that the results would be fruitful.

The anticipated North Eastern cable will run from Kenya's capital Nairobi through to the North Eastern part-Mandera which is also the Kenyan-Ethiopian border. And the cable infrastructure work to be completed in December 2008 is within the timeframe anticipated which will see the 4,500km cable joining all districts and provincial headquarters in Kenya.

Toure said the initiative was a great step towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in ICT. Toure, who was visiting Kenya for the first time since his appointment as the Union boss, said the goal of ITU was to ensure that every village and institution in Africa is connected by the year 2012.

"Laying the cable here in Kenya is a major contribution to the 'Connect Africa Program' that we launched last week, Monday in Kigali, Rwanda," he said.

While updating the ITU chief on the recent developments surrounding the cable, Kenya's Minister of Information and Communication, Mutahi Kagwe said that the first phase of the project would cover approximately 5,000km, estimated to cost about \$50 billion.

Kagwe said he was confident that foreign Companies that have been contracted for the project would live up to their expectations by completing the project in time. The said companies are ZTE and Huawei from China, and Sagem from France. The three will construct the 1,800km, 1,500km and 1,400km of the cables respectively.

The entire project will cost Sh4.2 billion, and the Kenyan government is reported to have already raised about Sh3.3 billion.

On his part, Toure expressed optimism that the cables would spur investment in business outsourcing, consequently creating a lot of jobs for local communities.

"The Kenyan government and other partners involved in the cable project can count on ITU for assistance. I can see fruitful deliberations emanating from the fibre optic cable; the first being a significant reduction in bandwidth costs that will lead to

lower costs in internet and telephone calls," Toure said.

Connecting Kenya to the rest of the world via an undersea cable will make the country an ICT hub in Africa. He said the cable would also enable the government to support social programmes such as e-learning and e-health to the village level, because the cable would bring cheaper and faster internet connectivity, hitherto considered by many low income earners to be exorbitant.

Kagwe echoed the words of Toure saying, "There will be enough and affordable bandwidth which will lead to lower cost and act as a catalyst for national development as proposed in the country's vision 2030."

In a related development, the Kenyan government plans to sign a contract with the constructors of the United Arab Emirates' submarine cable system expected to run from the Kenyan Coast of Mombasa to Fujaira in Dubai, mid next month.

After much bickering that emanated from the partners of the EASSY project, mainly Kenya and South Africa, the former decided to go it alone in constructing an undersea cable off the coast of East Africa. Commenting on this fallout, Toure said players in these projects should put aside their differences by first harmonising the laws that govern the sector. For a long time, smaller countries have expressed fears that South Africa would dominate the project,

"There should be some areas that need improvement so that we minimize on internal fights," said Toure, adding that all those laws governing foreign investments need to be compatible in all the countries.

The Connect Africa project alone is expected to cost about \$300 billion, \$55 billion of which has already been raised through pledges at the just ended International Telecommunication Union (ITU) summit in Kigali, Rwanda.

Toure also called upon other investors to join in the efforts to link major African cities for a better continent.

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