

THE DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATIONS WILL SWITCH TO DIGITAL ON 1 NOVEMBER

The Department of Communications is on track to switch on to digital on the 1st November 2008 and will provide digital broadcasting for 2010 and mobile TV during 2010.

The Media was briefed by Mr Themba Maseko (Government Spokesperson) on the Cabinet meeting dated 06th August 2008, the Minister of Communications of Digital Migration and the Deputy Minister of Education on the Mass Literacy Campaign.

The Minister of Communications, Dr Ivy Matsepe-Casaburri, briefed the media on the approval of the Broadcasting Digital Migration (BDM) Policy. Cabinet had also approved the technical specifications and manufacture of Set-Top Boxes (STBs) in South Africa. She covered the benefits of BDM, which included the use of STBs as a tool to bridge the digital divide and their capability to allow for service delivery, specifically due to their return path capability. Other benefits included the ancillary development of a world class electronics manufacturing industry. In line with the anti-poverty strategy, five million of the poorest TV owning households would receive up to 70 percent subsidisation on the STB cost.

The Deputy Minister of Education, Mr Enver Surty, briefed the media on the KHA RI GUDE (Let us Learn) mass literacy campaign; he stated its aims, progress so far and noted that UNESCO had been involved in quality control of the content. He stated that the implementation of the campaign had allowed for youth employment and that the efficacy of the current programme was much better than government's previous endeavours.

Mr Themba Maseko (Government Spokesperson) provided a briefing on the Cabinet Meeting of 6 August 2008. It dealt with the progress of the KHA RI GUDE mass literacy campaign, the launch of the "War on Poverty" campaign, the potential for agricultural growth as a corollary of the rising food prices. The role of the proposed National Food Control Agency was clarified. The approval of the Digital Migration Policy was stated, as well as the development of technical specifications for Set-Top Boxes (STBs). The deadline for the closure of xenophobia victim's shelters in Gauteng and the Western Cape was stated as being very close. The forthcoming highlights of the SADC Summit included the launch of the SADC Free Trade Area (FTA). Cabinet congratulated the Proteas for their win against England and wished Team South Africa success at the Beijing Olympics. Lastly, new appointments were covered.

Questions & Answers:

Q: A journalist asked what kind of annual FTA could one expect.

A: Mr Maseko replied that there would be a briefing by the Economic Cluster

at a later date on that topic, but that the FTA would facilitate easier trade via customs unions.

Q: A journalist asked how the FTA would affect Zimbabwe and whether Cabinet had discussed the latest allegations against the President.

A: Mr Maseko replied that Zimbabwe would be included as it was a part of SADC. With regards to the allegations, they were discussed very briefly by Cabinet.

Q: A journalist asked whether Jacob Zuma's court case was discussed, with specific regard to threats being made by his supporters.

A: Mr Maseko replied that it was discussed specifically, but that as government, they were very concerned, especially about the implications that the judiciary was not being respected and noted that if Cabinet was seen not to respect the judiciary then a very wrong message was being sent.

Q: A journalist asked if anyone from Cabinet would then engage the ANC on the matter.

A: Mr Maseko reiterated the South African Human Rights Commission's position that during election time inflammatory statements would be made.

Q: A journalist asked apart from STBs, what else the BDM dealt with.

A: The Minister of Communications replied that the main impetus for changing to digital signal was that it allowed for more efficient use of the radio spectrum and that the framework in the policy allowed them to pursue this. BDM would allow for service delivery via e-government strategies. Furthermore digital signal allowed for provision of services in a multiplicity of languages, and thus a content increase in the number of indigenous languages. STBs converted digital signal to analogue in order to allow it to be received by analogue television sets.

Q: A journalist asked what other things the policy covered with regard to STBs.

A: The Minister replied that framework suggested how they can better use the broadcast spectrum, how to better implement HDTV. She noted that there was a separate policy covering DVBH.

Q: A journalist stated that the proposed three year migration window from analogue to digital was the most optimistic in the world and asked what made government so confident it was feasible.

A; The Minister replied that during migration both an analogue and digital signal needed to be in operation and that this was costly, therefore the impetus was to do this for as short a time as feasible. Furthermore unlike first world countries, in South Africa the need to bridge the digital divide was

urgent. She noted that the spectrum used for one channel could host four channels in digital.

Q: A journalist asked why there was a policy for the disposal of existing televisions, as it was assumed that the point of STBs was to allow for existing television sets to be used.

A: The Minister replied that this was a future contingency plan for potential disposal.

Q: A journalist asked if a tender had been awarded for STB manufacturing.

A: The Minister replied that one reason for the delay in policy was that they had to wait in order to secure four emerging manufacturers and to provide for dialogue to determine an industry standard. So far eight companies had agreed and the specifications have been given to the South African Bureau of Standards (SABS), no tender would be given. Manufacturers would just have to adhere to the set technical specifications.

Q: A journalist asked how much Sentech would be receiving and how much the whole endeavour had cost government so far.

A: The Minister replied that Sentech had been receiving money over the years and that she could not be expected to remember, however this information was available in the public domain. Policy mandated that Sentech provide broadband for government, R 5 million had been given for the roll-out of wireless broadband for Dinaledi Schools. However R3 billion would be needed to provide wireless broadband to all spheres of government and public service initiatives.

Q: A journalist asked when the first STBs would be available and if a prototype had been developed. He asked whether the issue of conditional access had been resolved.

A: The Minister replied that if in 2011 you did not possess a STB, then you would be cut off.

Q: The journalist stated that he was referring to the instance of the SABC potentially cutting off access if your television licence had not been paid.

A: The Minister replied that she would have to look into the matter. She added that there was already set criteria and specifications for STB production and that there was a prototype.

Q: A journalist asked what the cost of a STB would be.

A: The Minister replied from R400 to R700.

Q: A journalist asked what the relationship between HDTV and the digital signal was and whether one could be done without the other, as M-Net was

advertising HDTV already.

A: The Minister replied that M-Net was already operating on a digital platform and that HDTV dealt with picture quality.

Q: A journalist asked whether digital broadcasting would cover mobile television and whether the lack of a tender meant that all companies would be producing STBs.

A: The Minister replied that all eight companies would be producing STBs. Digital signal transmission meant that content could be transmitted to any device and that they were currently developing policy with ICASA to prevent any clashes.

Q: A journalist asked how long it took for an individual to become functionally literate in a language within the literacy programme.

A: The Deputy Minister of Education replied that optimally it took six months, but that depending on the learner it could be much quicker. He invited the media to visit a training site in order to see the effectiveness of the programme for themselves.

Q: A journalist asked why it had taken government so long to implement this programme.

A: The Deputy Minister agreed that it was late, but stressed that they had learnt from their previous mistakes and were now in a capable position.

Q: A journalist asked how many people were estimated to be illiterate in South Africa.

A: The Deputy Minister replied approximately 9.4 million. He added that he had a video clip of an old man who had learnt how to read in six weeks and that he would make it available.

Q: A journalist asked when the deadline for the closure of xenophobia victim shelters was.

A: Mr Maseko replied that Gauteng and the Western Cape had set deadlines for the middle of August.

Minister's Briefing:

Cabinet approves Digital Migration Policy

7 August 2008

Pretoria: The Minister of Communications, Dr Ivy Matsepe-Casaburri was pleased by Cabinet's decision to approve the Broadcasting Digital Migration Policy for South Africa on Wednesday, 6 August 2008. The policy provides a

framework in which migration will take place in South Africa. This ushers a new era in the history of broadcasting industry.

Cabinet approved the manufacturing of Set Top Boxes (STB) in South Africa and the provision of these boxes as a tool for bridging the digital divide. Cabinet also approved the Technical Specifications of the STB. It decided on a scheme for ownership support and requested an implementation strategy be developed in collaboration with different departments

What is BDM?

Broadcasting Digital Migration (BDM) is the process of converting the broadcast of television broadcasting signals from analogue to digital technology. The migration is made necessary by the developments in telecommunications technologies which enable a more efficient use of radio frequency spectrum as well as better quality pictures and sound.

Benefits of BDM

BDM in South Africa is considered as part of the development agenda in support of the policy priorities of government such as e-government (provision of government services and information) for all citizens, especially those who have had limited or no access, local content development (creative industries), development of the electronics industry, job creation, social cohesion and national identity, serving the needs of persons with disability and universal access (upgrading of broadcasting infrastructure) as most of the spectrum will be freed by digital transmission.

Digital broadcasting also enables the provision of services in a multiplicity of languages thereby increasing access to information, which is essential to meet our poverty reduction goals.

Set Top Boxes (STB) as a tool to bridge digital divide

In order to receive the digital signal on their current analogue TV sets, households will need to use set-top-boxes (STBs) that convert the digital signal into analogue signal. The STBs will also serve as important tools for access to government information and services. Set top boxes could also be used with digital TVs in accessing government information.

The STBs would have a software solution which enables TV viewers to review upcoming programmes using a remote control. This enables planning on the part of viewers to view relevant programmes for their own convenience. For example, school children would be able to know when to view education programmes appropriate to their respective levels.

The inclusion of a Return Path Capability feature in the STB, enables the public to receive as well as send a message back as opposed to only receiving messages. This feature therefore enables the full and interactive provision of e-government services such as accessing, filling in and sending back government forms without the viewer leaving home or the place where the TV set is located.

Scheme-for-Ownership-Support for poor households

Government would provide ownership support as an incentive of up to 70% to approximately 5 million of the poorest TV owning households. These households will have to raise the other 30% on their own. This support will be based on the anti poverty strategy and its conditionalities. Funding for this support could be sourced from Universal Service and Access Fund (USAF).

Developing world-class local electronics manufacturing industry

To help boost the development of the local electronics manufacturing sector, STBs will be manufactured locally in high volumes. The South African STB manufacturing sector has the potential to manufacture up to 5.6 million STBs per annum when running at full capacity.

This creates an opportunity to build a globally competitive export sector, which is an objective of the Industrial Policy Action Plan. It will spur job creation resulting from the total digital migration value chain.

Editor's notes

In February 2007 the Cabinet approved that the digital signal be switched-on on 1 November 2008, and the analogue signal be switched-off on 1 November 2011. This allows both the digital and the analogue signal to be broadcast concurrently for the period of three years. The period within which both the digital and analogue signal is broadcast is referred to as the dual-illumination period.

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