

Zim: Foreign currency billing hindering free expression rights

The government of Zimbabwe has granted cell phone networks permission to bill subscribers in foreign currency. Subscribers across the three networks Telecel, Econet Wireless and Net One will be paying US\$0.28 cents per minute and US\$0.26 cents per minute for prepaid and contract lines, respectively.

Telecom operators' tariffs are determined in close consultation with the Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority in line with the internationally recognised models, approved by the International Telecommunications Union.

This week Net One contract line subscribers received instructions to make due payments and warnings of being switched off after accumulating bills ranging between US\$50 and US\$20,000 within two weeks. Because of late notification of change in payment terms for users, some Net One subscribers accumulate high bills; now more than 20,000 Net One contract line subscribers are likely to be beleaguered by the introduction of the foreign currency billing system in effect since 1 January 2009.

While MISA-Zimbabwe notes the resultant easing of network congestion for the subscribers and the possibility of the cellular networks expanding their capacity and improving efficiency, it remains that the use of cellular phones is drifting further from the ordinary Zimbabwean person. More than 80% of Zimbabwe's citizens live in abject poverty, ravaged by hunger, economic collapse, HIV-AIDS and recently, cholera, which has killed over 2000 people. Half of Zimbabwe's population - five million people - needs food assistance.

The demand for payment in foreign currency for mobile telephone use means that communication will no longer be affordable as the majority of Zimbabweans have no access to foreign currency since the few who are still employed are paid in Zimbabwean dollars, and the majority of Zimbabweans have no hope of using a mobile phone at such costs. For this reason, access to tools such as the internet, fixed and cellular telephony networks have become a privilege for a few, going against the emphasis of the World Summit on Information Societies (WSIS), Tunisia 2005. This deprivation of the people of Zimbabwe's right to communicate is, in MISA-Zimbabwe's view, an impediment to accessing a basic right to communication and free expression, as guaranteed in Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights. Zimbabweans find themselves increasingly silenced by a plethora of laws that suppress dissent and now added to that, the prohibitive cost of simply talking.

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