

## Zimbabwe: Minister moves to pacify phone users

HARARE: Zimbabwe's new Information Communication Technology minister on Tuesday, 24 February moved to calm a turbulent phone market after a huge public outcry that followed the dollarisation of telecoms and a ten-fold hike in mobile phone tariffs.

Minister Nelson Chamisa on Tuesday met with leaders of the Posts and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe (POTRAZ), leaders of state-owned fixed line network, TelOne as well as bosses of NetOne, the cellular phone operator at the minister's office along Samora Machel Avenue.

Chamisa's new office is next to Hardwicke House, the Central Intelligence headquarters in central Harare, just next to the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe building. NetOne managing director, Reward Kangai, who is the new chairman of the Telecommunications Association of Zimbabwe, attended the meeting together with acting managing director for TelOne, Humpton Mhlanga.

The *Zimbabwe Times* heard that there was delicate balancing of two competing interests, the need for the parastatals to break even and the basic right of citizens to access communication and free expression.

The meeting, was held amid a consumer storm, in the wake of intensifying public outrage over the prohibit foreign currency-pegged tariffs being charged by telecommunications operators and the sky-high bills.

Chamisa said he had asked the phone operators to review the tariffs.

"I advised them to revisit the billing tariffs to address concerns being raised by the majority of consumers, Chamisa told the *Zimbabwe Times*. "We are supposed to be responding positively to the consumers."

The operators were in December granted permission by the government to charge tariffs in foreign currency which has seen subscribers across the three networks Telecel, Econet Wireless and NetOne paying USD0,29 cents per minute and USD0,30 cents per three minute on a landline.

Previously bills were payable in Zimbabwe dollars, at a nominal rate.

NetOne contract line subscribers were shocked with recent massive cellphone bills ranging between US\$1 and US\$20,000 for two weeks. The statements also contained threats that payments were overdue and warnings of disconnection if payment was not made immediately.

Because of late notification of change in payment terms for users, NetOne subscribers picked up astronomical bills that could take some of them up to ten years to settle.

At least 20 000 NetOne contract line subscribers reportedly face the threat of losing their lines over failure to meet the current foreign currency billing system.

The sharp hike has seriously disrupted the business structure of e-commerce, e-banking, e-business and ordinary phone users.

Demand for payment in foreign currency for mobile telephone use has made phoning unaffordable in

Zimbabwe as the majority has no access to foreign currency. About 94 percent of the population is unemployed, and the few who still work are paid in Zimbabwean dollars. Under the present circumstances the majority of Zimbabweans have no hope of using a mobile phone at such costs.

Press freedom group, MISA Zimbabwe, has also made representations to the minister, arguing that access to tools such as the Internet, fixed and cellular telephony networks have become a privilege for a few in Zimbabwe. This goes against the emphasis of the World Summit on Information Societies (WSIS) summit held in Tunisia in 2005 to which Zimbabwe was a signatory.

“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,” said MISA chairman Loughty Dube. “Zimbabweans find themselves increasingly silenced by a plethora of laws that suppress dissent and now added to that, the prohibitive cost of simply talking.”

Although subscribers argue that the tariffs are too high, mobile phone companies such as Econet Wireless and NetOne still maintain that the charges are within regional levels.

Captains in the industry say despite the public outcry, the tariffs are in tandem with regional levels.

“It's just that Zimbabweans love talking,” said one.

A senior telecoms industry official told the *Zimbabwe Times* that the reduction in value added tax on airtime from 22,5 percent to 15 percent had seen a slight reduction in tariffs bringing them to the regional average of US\$0,30 per minute.

“Migration from cheap Zimbabwe dollar-based calls to realistic tariffs has been a challenge,” he said.

Dube urged the operators to take into serious consideration the fact that telecommunications remain key pillars of freedom of expression and access to information as articulated under Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.