

SA, Botswana agree to work on digital migration

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PRETORIA: With the imminent International Telecommunications Union (ITU) deadline, South Africa and Botswana have agreed to cooperate in mitigating cross-border radio frequency spectrum interference...

This follows bilateral engagements between Communications Minister Faith Muthambi and her Botswana counterpart, Transport and Communications Minister Tshenolo Mabeo in Gaborone, Botswana, recently.

"We travelled to Botswana where we discussed issues of potential frequency spectrum interference as a result of the Digital Migration Programme implementation.

"The primary objective was to identify issues of mutual interest on cross-border interference and other related matters in order to establish an amicable solution of addressing challenges, as and when they arise.



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"Our discussions also centred on key elements that require bilateral engagements between the two countries, namely, sharing of migration plans, processes to handle frequency spectrum interference, release of digital dividends timing and Memorandum of Understanding/Agreement," the Minister said.

According to the ITU conference held in Geneva, in 2006, an agreement was reached to switch from analogue to digital transmission by June 2015.

To give effect to this arrangement, the Ministers agreed to focus on the following areas of co-operation:

- Enhance continued collaboration and cooperation of the regulators in addressing matters of mutual interest on cross border interference on terrestrial services and any other related matters;
- Sharing of plans with regard to the roadmap for the release and use of digital dividend for other services as and when may be necessary; and
- Continue further engagement towards the development of a Memorandum of Understanding.

Minister Muthambi said after briefing Minister Mabeo on South Africa's progress with regard to digital migration, Botswana responded with their migration plans and analysis of data with the same respect of potential frequency spectrum interference.

"It is worth mentioning that with respect to the migration process, Botswana is in the same situation as South Africa.

"Although, they have initiated a Public Awareness Campaign, but there are challenges with the Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT) receiver's acquisition. Like South Africa, Botswana does not have companies with manufacturing capabilities of producing the required devices," she said.

Considering the findings of the analysis of data collected that shows no potential interference, Minister Muthambi said the focus was placed on the release of digital dividend timelines by both countries.

Botswana intends to begin the process of licencing after the World Radio Conference (WCR) of 2015. This allows South Africa a period of between 6 to 9 months from the time of the commencement of licensing by Botswana to have Set-Top-Boxes on the ground.

"However, the Botswana counterparts committed themselves to share with us the timelines and methodology they are going to apply in licencing and releasing of digital dividends.

"They indicated that they have started going through a consultative process with relevant stakeholders in the country regarding this matter," she said.

A team comprised of regulators between the two countries have been established to look into the development of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). Minister Muthambi said the anticipation is to have the MoU signed between the two countries in November, later this year.

South Africa is also expected to conclude and sign bilateral engagements with Zimbabwe, Namibia, Mozambique, Lesotho and Swaziland to minimise cross border radio frequency spectrum interference.

On 27 May and 3 June Minister Muthambi together with her DTT technical team will be in Lesotho and Swaziland.

"We do these MoUs because we have to prioritise South African communities alongside the borderline areas for the distribution of Set-Top-Boxes in order to mitigate any potential frequency spectrum interferences," she said.

Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT)

DTT is a reliable and much cost efficient means to distribute linear television content and has many advantages over the old, analogue broadcasting that is still in use today.

Digital migration refers to the switch from an analogue broadcasting system to a digital broadcasting system and this has been a world-wide move which is being driven by the ITU.

In order to view digital television signals on an ordinary analogue television set, consumers will need a so-called Set-Top-Box. The purpose of the Set-Top-Box is to convert the DTT signal for reception on an ordinary analogue television set.

If consumers haven't acquired a set top box by analogue switch-off, they will no longer be able to view the existing terrestrial television broadcasting services

The department anticipates to expedite the rollout of Set-Top-Boxes to be completed in the coming 18-24 months so that South Africans can switch off analogue signal and begin to realise the benefits of digital dividend to allow for the rollout of Wireless Broadband Services.

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