

MTN denies shutdown for Swazi protests

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Cellphone operator MTN on Monday, 11 April 2011, denied allegations that its subsidiary in neighbouring Swaziland had shut down its services ahead of a three-day mass protest that started yesterday.



The kingdom is bracing itself for a North African-style protest from pro-democracy movements to force the resignation of Africa's last absolute monarch.

The protestors have vowed to make Swaziland ungovernable. Last week, Prime Minister Barnabas Dlamini declared the demonstrations illegal and warned that anyone who took part did so at their own risk.

Lucky Lukhele, a spokesman for the Swaziland Solidarity Network, on Monday accused MTN of "deliberately tampering" with its mobile internet service provider to appease King Mswati.

"This is frustrating Facebook users who use this medium (internet access on cellphones) to get information about tomorrow's protest", Lukhele said. "The king owns shares in the network (MTN) as part of his personal investments meant primarily to control the company," he said.

But Rich Mkhondo, MTN's group executive for corporate affairs, said the company remained "politically impartial" in all its operations. "MTN Swaziland is experiencing data speeds below normal due to increased traffic volumes on the mobile network, which runs on the 2G spectrum", Mkhondo said.

Four prominent organisers behind the protests were also arrested by the Swazi police, Lukhele confirmed on Monday.

Those incarcerated are Maxwell Dlamini, president of the Swaziland National Union of Students, Sifiso Mabuza, the deputy president of the Swaziland Youth Congress, and Simanga Ginindza and Themba Mabuza of the Swaziland United Democratic Front.

The Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) was also due to hold a sympathy protest at the Oshoek border post in Mpumalanga.

Swaziland faces chronic financial constraints after a 60% decrease last year in revenue from the Southern African Customs Union.

King Mswati has been under pressure from civil society movements to institute democratic reforms.

Source: Business Day

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