

First Afghan fibre optic cable connects to Tajikistan

June 4 2009, by Sharif Khoram



Afghan President Hamid Karzai calls on a reporter at a press conference on June 1, 2009. Karzai tested a new fibre optic cable connection with Tajikistan on Wednesday in a video conference call with Tajik President Emomali Rakhmon.

Part of Afghanistan's first international fibre optic cable has opened in a project that will make the country millions of dollars and boost regional connectivity, a cabinet minister said Thursday.

President Hamid Karzai tested the cable with Tajikistan on Wednesday in a video conference call with Tajik President Emomali Rakhmon, Communications Minister Amir Zai Sangin told reporters.

The link is one of five with neighbouring countries that can transform Afghanistan into a regional hub for Internet, telephone, television and other services, he said.

For the first time, it will connect Central Asia to Southeast Asia through an underground cable, with previous connections mostly via satellites in Europe and the United States, the minister said.

"Through this network most of the provinces (in Afghanistan) will be connected and at the same time Afghanistan will be connected... with its neighbouring countries," Sangin said.

The country expected to earn three to four million dollars a month from transit fees and subscriptions to the service, he said.

The project, worth roughly 70 million dollars, was started two years ago and is around 80 percent complete.

Uzbekistan will be the next country connected to the cable, which is 1.65 metres (5.5 feet) underground and runs the route of a planned ringroad that connects major cities near the border.

The portions yet to be finished are in parts of Afghanistan where insurgent violence is the strongest, including in the southern and eastern areas.

Asked about potential sabotage of the cable by insurgents who have already targeted mobile-phone towers, the minister said security posts would be established every few kilometres (miles) to guard the cable.

It was estimated that any cut could be repaired in two hours, he said.

Sangin said there had been attacks on workers involved in the project but this would not stop the work.

"Even though there are problems and risks, we cannot delay our work. If we delay this and wait, the country will never be built," he said.

The minister said he expected the new cable would see an 80 percent cut in Internet prices in Afghanistan and boost the quality of service.

It was expected to raise Internet access from a current four percent in the largely illiterate nation to 20 percent in three years, he said.

The Internet was introduced in Afghanistan after the 2001 US-led invasion ousted the Taliban regime.

Prior to that, the telephone service was so poor that some Afghans would travel to neighbouring Pakistan to make a international call.

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Citation: First Afghan fibre optic cable connects to Tajikistan (2009, June 4) retrieved 17 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-06-afghan-fibre-optic-cable-tajikistan.html>

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