Africa's largest undersea Internet cable to land this month

April 7 2011

Young Ivorians learn how to use computers in Abidjan. A new undersea telecommunications cable to boost Africa's Internet access will land this month, mobile service provider MTN has said, calling it the continent's largest data pipeline yet.

A new undersea telecommunications cable to boost Africa's Internet access will land this month, mobile service provider MTN said Thursday, calling it the continent's largest data pipeline yet.

The 14,000-kilometre (8,700-mile) West Africa Cable System (WACS) fibre optic line is scheduled to reach South Africa's Western Cape province on April 18, linking the continent's Internet providers directly to the servers of Europe and boosting the bandwidth of the world's least-connected region.

The cable starts in London and will connect 15 points along Africa's western coast, said MTN, which has a $90-million (63-million-euro) stake in the $650-million system and is the project's single largest investor.

The new link is the latest in a series of submarine cables that hold the promise of an Internet explosion for Africa, where only 9.6 percent of people are web users, compared to 65 percent of Europeans.

The capacity of Africa's fibre optic cable connections has expanded almost 300-fold since 2009, when the continent relied mainly on excruciatingly slow satellite connections, and will expand another 23 percent with the launch of the 5,120-gigabit WACS.

"WACS will ... go a long way towards catapulting Africa into the digital age," said Karel Pienaar, managing director for MTN South Africa.

"Lack of bandwidth on the continent has arrested the development of Africa and has constrained the continent from achieving its full potential."

MTN said it has been allocated an initial 11 percent of the cable's capacity when it goes live for commercial use in the second quarter.