

Facebook hits 100 mn India users, largest after US (Update)

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Facebook has hit more than 100 million users in India, only the second country after the United States to achieve the milestone, the social networking company said Wednesday.

The fast-expanding mobile smartphone market is driving growth in India

along with better Internet coverage across the country of 1.2 billion people, said Kevin D'Souza, Facebook India's head of growth and mobile partnerships.

"Today, we have more than 100 million people who access Facebook actively in India each month," D'Souza said in an email to AFP.

Facebook has experienced a meteoric rise since setting up its first office in the southern city of Hyderabad four years ago, when India had about eight million users of the network.

D'Souza said the company was looking to reach "millions more" in the country in the near future through new business deals and partners.

"We've only just begun. Facebook's mission is to give people the power to share, and to make the world more open and connected," D'Souza said.

In December last year Facebook tied up with India's top mobile service provider Airtel in a deal that gave its prepaid users free access to the social network in nine regional languages.

A month later it bought an Indian mobile technology start-up called Little Eye Labs to develop performance analysis and monitoring tools for providing data such as memory and power consumption of applications.

Facebook, with more than 1.23 billion users globally, is turning to emerging markets including those in Asia to drive expansion after growth in the West tapers off.

It leads social network services in all but six countries—notably Russia, where local rivals are preferred, and China, where it has been largely

banned since 2009.

Facebook announced in February a takeover of free mobile messaging service WhatsApp for \$19 billion in a deal that marries its social network users with Whatsapp's 450 million users.

India has 164.81 million Internet subscribers, with more than half logging in from their mobile phones, the telecoms regulator said last year.

India is expected later this year to overtake the United States as the country with the most Facebook users, with the figure forecast to pass 150 million, analysts say.

"At its current pace, India is the only country which has a realistic chance of overtaking the US," said Kiruba Shankar, who heads Business Blogging, a New Delhi-based social media consulting firm.

"India still has a huge untapped potential. The next generation of Facebook users will piggyback on the massive growth of mobile usage in the country," Shankar told AFP.

India's smartphone sales grew to over 44 million in 2013, lifted by strong sales of modestly priced phones made by local firms such as Micromax Karbonn, research firm IDC said in a recent report.

India is one of the fastest-growing countries globally in terms of smartphone adoption, mainly powered by homegrown vendors, IDC said.

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