Cuban govt is expanding Wi-Fi access, making it cheaper

June 18 2015, byMichael Weissenstein

In this March 11, 2015 file photo, Adonis Ortiz chats with his father, who lives in the U.S., using a free Wi-Fi network at a center run by famed artist Kcho, in Havana, Cuba. Cuba says it's expanding Internet access by adding Wi-Fi capacity to dozens of state-run Internet centers and more than halving the cost that users pay for an hour online. (AP Photo/Desmond Boylan, File)

Cuba says it's expanding Internet access by adding Wi-Fi capacity to dozens of state-run Internet centers and more than halving the cost that

users pay for an hour online.

The announcement published in Thursday's edition of the newspaper Juventud Rebelde is the first significant expansion of the Internet in Cuba since President Barack Obama said on Dec. 17 that the communist government had told him it would give its people more access as part of a historic detente between the Cold War enemies.

The spokesman for Cuba's state communications company told the newspaper that 35 government computer centers around the country would have Wi-Fi starting next month, and the price of one hour online would drop to $2 from $4.50 now.

That price remains unaffordable for most Cubans but the change would represent a significant improvement in access for many people.

Home Internet remains illegal for most of the Cuban population and online access at offices with Internet is highly limited and controlled. Until now, the only Wi-Fi network has been at tourist hotels at hourly prices that represent nearly a quarter of the average monthly salary for Cubans.

"The internet space is opening up here and I think this is a significant step," said Norges Rodriguez, a blogger and telecommunications engineer in Havana. "A year or two ago, we didn't have anything like this."

Cuba's lack of internet access remains dire, he pointed out, saying thirty-five new Wi-Fi points would be insignificant in any other country in the hemisphere.

Critics say Cuba's lack of connectivity is due largely to its fear that the internet will catalyze social unrest. The Cuban government blames the

U.S. embargo on the island and has publicly expressed its intention to expand access for its citizens.

There have been hints of the government following through slowly on that promise in recent months. The state communications monopoly, ETECSA, has experimented with a temporary price cut to $2, and the artist Kcho garnered much attention by opening a free, government-sanctioned Wi-F connection for the public at his Havana arts center.

Making the price cut permanent, and adding dozens of Wi-Fi hotspotx allowing people to use their own smartphones, tablets and laptops at state centers instead of antiquated government computers, would be a notable step in making online life easier in one of the world's least-connected countries.

Many Cubans, particularly young people in the capital, are as technologically adept as their peers in more-connected countries, despite severe limits on their ability to obtain technology. The latest iPhone is a surprisingly common sight in Havana, and there are hundreds of privately run mobile-phone shops where people can buy and repair equipment and get applications installed on their phone directly from technicians' computers instead of the internet.

Outside Havana, the situation is far tougher, with far fewer cellphones in private hands, let alone smartphones, and a mere handful of centers to get online, even in major cities.

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