

S. Korea launches 5G smartphone networks ahead of schedule

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In this Tuesday, April 2, 2019 photo, an employee of KT Corp. wears a VR device for an audio-visual experience during a press conference on 5G service at its the headquarters in Seoul, South Korea. South Korea's telecommunications carriers on Wednesday, April 3, have turned on super-fast 5G mobile internet networks abruptly ahead of schedule in an attempt to ensure the country becomes the first in the world to launch the services. The signs read: "Supernatural Power 5G." (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon)

South Korea's telecommunications carriers turned on super-fast 5G mobile internet networks abruptly ahead of schedule in an attempt to ensure the country becomes the first in the world to launch the services.

The carriers say 5G-enabled smartphones are capable of downloading data 20 times faster than existing 4G devices, which in theory would enable users to download movie files almost instantly. The faster networks would also improve live broadcasts and streaming services for music and video while allowing for a broader range of virtual reality services, the companies say.

The 5G networks of the three South Korean mobile operators went live at 11 p.m. Wednesday, hours before U.S. carrier Verizon turned on its 5G network in some areas of Minneapolis and Chicago a week ahead of schedule. The carriers had initially planned to start their 5G services on Friday, but moved up to stay ahead of Verizon. The change came hours after a meeting between the carriers and government regulators, who modified service terms so that the companies could sign up users earlier.

However, the South Korean 5G services were initially available only to a few individuals selected as brand promoters, including figure skating superstar Yuna Kim, who SK Telecom announced as one of its "first customers."



SK Telecom CEO Park Jung-ho, left, and participants attend a media showcase for its 5G service in Seoul, South Korea, Wednesday, April 3, 2019. SK Telecom will be launching commercial 5G services nationwide on Friday, April 5, in line with its competitors. The signs read: "The world's first commercial services." (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon)



SK Telecom CEO Park Jung-ho, left, and participants attend a media showcase for its 5G service in Seoul, South Korea, Wednesday, April 3, 2019. SK Telecom will be launching commercial 5G services nationwide on Friday, April 5, in line with its competitors. The signs read: "The world's first commercial services." (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon)



A man passes by a banner advertising 5G networks in Seoul, South Korea, Thursday, April 4, 2019. South Korea's telecommunications carriers turned on super-fast 5G mobile internet networks abruptly ahead of schedule in an attempt to ensure the country becomes the first in the world to launch the services. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon)



South Korean Comedian Yang Se-hyun wears a VR device for an audio-visual experience during a media showcase for 5G service of SK Telecom in Seoul, South Korea, Wednesday, April 3, 2019. SK Telecom will be launching commercial 5G services nationwide on Friday, April 5, in line with its competitors. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon)



Participants wear VR devices for an audio-visual experience during a media showcase for 5G service of SK Telecom in Seoul, South Korea, Wednesday, April 3, 2019. SK Telecom will be launching commercial 5G services nationwide across South Korea on Friday, April 5, in line with its competitors. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon)



In this Tuesday, April 2, 2019 file photo, Lee Pil-jae, second from right, Vice President at KT Corp., and models introduce various 5G services available on smartphones during a press conference on 5G service at KT Corp's headquarters in Seoul, South Korea. South Korea's telecommunications carriers on Wednesday, April 3, have turned on super-fast 5G mobile internet networks abruptly ahead of schedule in an attempt to ensure the country becomes the first in the world to launch the services. The signs read: "Play with the world with KT 5G." (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon, File)



In this Tuesday, April 2, 2019 file photo, an employee of KT Corp. demonstrates with a 5G services available on smarphone during a press conference on 5G service at its the headquarters in Seoul, South Korea. South Korea's telecommunications carriers on Wednesday, April 3, have turned on super-fast 5G mobile internet networks abruptly ahead of schedule in an attempt to ensure the country becomes the first in the world to launch the services. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon, File)



In this Tuesday, April 2, 2019 file photo, Lee Pil-jae, Vice President at KT Corp., speaks during a press conference on 5G service at its the headquarters in Seoul, South Korea. South Korea's telecommunications carriers on Wednesday, April 3, have turned on super-fast 5G mobile internet networks abruptly ahead of schedule in an attempt to ensure the country becomes the first in the world to launch the services.(AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon, File)



In this Wednesday, April 3, 2019 file photo, participants wear VR devices for an audio-visual experience during a media showcase for 5G service of SK Telecom in Seoul, South Korea. South Korea's telecommunications carriers on Wednesday have turned on super-fast 5G mobile internet networks abruptly ahead of schedule in an attempt to ensure the country becomes the first in the world to launch the services. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon, File)



In this Wednesday, April 3, 2019, photo, South Korean figure skating superstar Yuna Kim attends a media showcase for its 5G service in Seoul, South Korea. South Korea's telecommunications carriers on Wednesday have turned on super-fast 5G mobile internet networks abruptly ahead of schedule in an attempt to ensure the country becomes the first in the world to launch the services. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon)

Regular customers in capital Seoul and some other major cities will be able to sign up for 5G services starting on Friday. The carriers plan to expand their coverage to 85 cities across the country by the end of the year.

"The government and private companies came together to achieve the world's first commercialized 5G services and this proves once again our country is undoubtedly the top powerhouse in information and communications," said You Young-min, South Korean minister for science and information technology.

The supposed milestone is widely seen as symbolic. Park Tae-wan, a ministry official, said a "world's first" reference could possibly help the mobile industry market's know-how.

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