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Republic of Zambia

Ministerial Statement on roll out of towers and associated
communications equipment

Ministry of Transport, Works, Supply and Communication

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Mr Speaker,

I wish to thank you, Sir, for according me this opportunity to issue a statement on the roll-out of communication towers and services to rural areas and other un-served areas. May I take this opportunity to inform this august House and through it the nation on the steps that Government has taken to ensure communication towers and services are rolled-out to rural areas and other un-served areas within the shortest possible time.

I wish to start by reiterating that the Government under the able leadership of His Excellency, Mr Michael Chilufya Sata is committed to uplifting the social and economic well-being of our people. In this regard, Government has embraced Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as an enabler of development and is determined to see to it that ICT infrastructure and services are available to its citizens in all parts of the country.

Sir, allow me to provide some statistics on the number of towers in the country and associated mobile connectivity. The country has a total of 2070 mobile communication tower sites, providing the country geographic coverage of 78.4%. The number of mobile users as at end of March 2012 stood at 8,455,462 reflecting a penetration of 63.1% per 100 inhabitants.

Mr Speaker, I wish to mention that whilst there has been significant growth in the roll out and uptake of mobile communication services, this growth has been skewed to urban areas. In order to ensure that ICT infrastructure and services are available to all parts of the country, Government has taken steps to ensure speedy roll-out of communication towers and services to rural areas and other un-served areas.

The House may wish to note that in the working tours that His Honour the Vice President of the Republic of Zambia made to over twenty villages in Muchinga, Northern, Eastern and Southern Provinces it was discovered that most Chiefs' palaces had no mobile coverage.

Arising from the foregoing, the Government had made it priority to extend communication towers and services to cover all chiefdoms within the shortest possible time.

Mr Speaker, in order to facilitate the speedy roll-out of communication towers and services to cover all chiefdoms and other un-served peri-urban and rural areas, Government has constituted a technical committee comprising:

- (1) Representatives from all the three mobile operators.
- (2) Ministry of Chiefs and Traditional Affairs.
- (3) Ministry of Mines, Energy and Water Development.
- (4) Ministry of Transport, Works, Supply and Communications.
- (5) Disaster Management and Mitigation Unit.
- (6) ZICTA.
- (7) ZESCO.
- (8) Rural Electrification Unit.
- (9) Rural Road Unit.
- (10) Zambia Environmental Management Agency and other relevant stakeholders.

Mr Speaker, arising from the work of the committee it has been established that out of a total of 287 chiefdoms about 101 have coverage, 131 have no coverage and information on the remaining 55 is still being gathered to establish the coverage status.

I wish to take this opportunity to request the distinguished Honourable Members of this august House to confirm from the list that I have, on the coverage status, whether the information given on the chiefdoms in their constituencies is correct.

Mr Speaker, I would like to inform the august House that survey teams shall soon travel to the chiefdoms that do not have coverage to select suitable locations for erecting the towers and associated communication equipment. A detailed survey schedule is being finalized. Our desire is to achieve this in the next two months – sixty days.

I would, therefore, request the distinguished Honourable Members of this august House and the affected royal highnesses to support this programme by facilitating access and providing suitable land as may be identified by the survey teams.

Allow mw to mention that in order to ensure good coverage of the chiefdoms the suitable locations may not necessarily be at the palaces. Therefore, the royal highnesses should not insist on the towers being cited at the palaces. I am mentioning this, because we have received a number of complaints in some locations where towers and communication services have been rolled-out.

I am pleased to inform this august House that in order to facilitate the speedy roll-out and to promote the widespread availability and usage of electronic communications services throughout Zambia, and to bridge the digital divide between urban, peri-urban and rural areas, I have signed and issued Statutory Instrument No. 38 of 2012, the Information and Communication Technologies (Universal Access) Regulations, 2012.

The Statutory Instrument provides a framework for designating un-served areas and the funding mechanism for the roll-out of towers under Universal Access Fund.

We are positive that with the above policy intervention we will realize a well-coordinated, Government controlled expedient roll-out of communication towers and services to un-served rural and peri-urban areas.

You may wish to find out when exactly each site will be executed. We shall be able to provide the details in due course once the survey schedule has been finalized and the surveys completed. It is from the survey that operators can determine the type of tower and height of tower to be ordered and erected.

ZICTA will acquire land to ensure collocation and sharing of infrastructure as well as to ensure that services are provided to the citizenry at lower costs.

Mr Speaker, I now wish to provide information on the on-going roll-out of communication towers to the previously identified 354 locations under the collaboration with Airtel.

I wish to mention that progress has been slow due to logistical challenges associated with provisioning of services to rural areas, hence the intervention we have undertaken to set up a technical committee comprising all mobile operators and other stakeholders and the issuance of Statutory Instrument number 39 of 2012 on Universal Access. The involvement of all operators and stakeholders is intended to rationalize resources through infrastructure sharing and to speed up implementation.

The challenges experienced include lack of access roads, lack of commercial power, vandalism of erected sites, road accidents resulting in the deaths of six members of the executing teams, poor demand resulting in poor or no return on investment for operators and operational challenges associated with running the said sites. As at 17th July 2012, only 174 towers had been rolled out and a balance of approximately 180 towers are yet to be completed under the on-going programme with a subsidy provided.

The roll-out schedule for the remaining sites is being reconciled and harmonized in line with the decision by Government to prioritise roll-out of communication towers to cover all chiefdoms. We shall provide a consolidated execution schedule in due course.

Finally, I wish to conclude by thanking the operators and all the other stakeholders for the commitment they had shown to work with Government to ensure that we urgently extend communication towers and services to cover all chiefdoms and other un-served peri-urban and rural areas within the shortest possible time.

Mr Speaker, I thank you.