

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

MOBILE COMMUNICATION SERVICES IN UNSERVED AND UNDER-SERVED AREAS

The Minister of Transport and Communication (Mr Mushimba): Mr Speaker, I wish to express my sincere gratitude to you for giving me the opportunity to make another ministerial statement, this time, on the provision of mobile communication services in unserved and underserved areas across the country.

Sir, in line with the provisions of Section 13 of Statutory Instrument (SI) No. 38 of 2012, the Universal Access Regulations, the Government has been extending mobile communication services in order to attain maximum possible population coverage at the ward level countrywide, particularly targeting economically disadvantaged unserved and underserved areas.

Mr Speaker, you may recall that, in 2012, the Patriotic Front (PF) Government embarked on a programme to construct Global System for Mobile (GSM) communication towers in areas that had remained unserved or underserved since the inception of GSM communication services in Zambia using resources from the Universal Access and Service Fund (UASF) administered by the Zambia Information and Communications Technology Authority (ZICTA). Under Phase I, the Government constructed 169 communication towers in all the ten provinces as follows:

| <i>Province</i> | <i>No. of towers</i> |
|-----------------|----------------------|
| Eastern | 23 |
| Lusaka | 2 |
| Muchinga | 12 |

| | |
|---------------|----|
| Northern | 19 |
| Copperbelt | 11 |
| Luapula | 19 |
| Central | 21 |
| Southern | 21 |
| Western | 15 |
| North-Western | 26 |

Sir, due to high demand for mobile communication services, thirty-five additional towers were erected, bringing the total number of communication towers erected under Phase I to 204. Of the 204, 182 are functional and on-air while twenty-two are off-air and require spares, which have been ordered. Five of the twenty-two towers were totally vandalised by thieves who stole the solar panels and batteries that power with the towers. The vandalised sites are those at Chibwindi in the Northern Province, Lesa in Copperbelt Province, Chiengele and Sibukali in the Western Province and Mukubwe in the Central Province. You may also recall that the 204 towers experienced a disruption of services in the fourth quarter of 2015 due to a major fault that occurred on AMOS-5, an orbital satellite owned by Space Communication (SPACECOM). That challenge was overcome and services restored through a different satellite. Further, due to the rampant vandalism that I mentioned earlier, which mainly involves theft of materials that support the sites, such as solar panels, batteries and cables, we faced challenges in operating the towers. This challenge is similar to the one we have had regarding theft of optical fibre and electrical cables for the Zambia Electricity Supply Corporation (ZESCO), which contain copper wires.

Sir, I call upon the communities in which the communication towers have been erected, through their hon. Members in this House, to protect the investments, as they are meant to alleviate the communication challenges faced by our people countrywide.

Mr Speaker, Zambia is vast and wide, and our rural areas continue to be sparsely populated. Therefore, they are considered to not be viable business areas by the mobile network operators like such as Mobile Telecommunication Network (MTN) and Airtel, which means that the digital gap between rural and urban areas still remains a challenge and the Government has to step in and bridge it. That is why we have embarked on Phase II of construction of communication towers to increase coverage in un-served and under-served areas and improve the mobile communication network and related information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure for greater population inclusion.

Sir, a technical survey conducted in 2015 in districts, constituencies and wards around the country identified 469 new sites for the construction of communication towers under Phase II. The scope of the second phase of the project covers 1,009 towers and includes upgrading of the current transmission and radio access network under the Zambia Telecommunications Company Limited (ZAMTEL). Of the 1,009 towers, 808 are green field while 201 are existing ones that need to be upgraded. Three hundred and thirty-nine (339) of the 808 green field towers will be constructed to support the microwave signal transmission backbone for ZAMTEL while the radio access equipment will provide coverage to attain maximum population coverage in targeted areas of wards at a minimum of 10 km radius in contrast to the towers in Phase I, which cover a 5 km radius. Phase II of the construction of communication towers will primarily target dense clusters of settlements and economically active rural areas, such as rural health centres, schools, farming blocks, mines, tourism centres and trading locations. The following outcomes of the successful implementation of Phase II will impact on communities across the country and drive socio-economic growth:

- (a) raising the mobile network coverage across the country to about 92 per cent;

- (b) significantly increasing the delivery and access of various services in rural areas by both the public and private sectors to support socio-economic activities;
- (c) increasing Internet use and access to information, especially in rural areas;
- (d) facilitation of electronic collection of revenue by the Government through, for example, mobile money transfers.

Mr Speaker, the Government is finalising the process of securing resources for the construction of the communication towers and has engaged the Republic of China, through the Export and Import (EXIM) Bank of China to finance the project. Once the financing arrangement is concluded, the implementation of the project will begin, expectedly in coincidence with the end of the current rain season.

Mr Speaker, following the completion of the survey and the positioning of the new towers, my ministry has received many requests from hon. Members of this House for the towers to be located in their constituencies. My ministry assures them that their concerns have been noted and that as we source more funds, their concerns will be addressed.

Sir, finally, allow me to urge the hon. Members of this House to support this project and sensitise their people on it. The ministry is confident that after completion of Phase II of this project, the country will attain maximum mobile communication coverage.

I thank you, Sir.