The Regional Cable Network (RCN), a Reliable and Powerful New Communications Infrastructure for the Middle East

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Last December, few days before Christmas, seven regional telecommunications operators announced their goal of building the longest fully-redundant terrestrial communications infrastructure in the Middle East. As a matter of fact this is the first time that a communications cable will be capable of covering the entire Gulf region thanks to a single uniform infrastructure. Currently in the Middle East, mobile markets’ historic growth levels are unlikely to continue so robustly, while instead there is a growing interest in relations to fixed line markets with specific attention given to optic fiber (fiber to the home, FTTH). This new fiber road could bring the FTTH to the Middle East, transforming internet access in the area and allowing Middle East’s countries to communicate with the rest of the world with an enhanced speed and access, no more with inadequate infrastructures.

Source: Gulfnews
The Regional Cable Network (RCN) – this is the name of this cable infrastructure – will run for 7,750km (round trip route). It will extend from the city of Fujairah (UAE, one of today’s busiest nodes for submarine and fiber cables) to Istanbul (Turkey) passing through Riyadh (Saudi Arabia), Amman (Jordan) and Tartous (Syria) before entering the Turkish territory. From Istanbul this cable will be extended also to Europe. In fact, there are already 15 available access points located along the Bulgarian and Greek borders with Turkey. This project will be a relevant entryway to the internet for approximately two billion people. The project will cost approximately US$500 million.

The RCN cable will have a 12.8 terabit per second data carrying capacity and it should be operational by the second quarter of 2011. The basic idea for this project is that it will guarantee that every site along the cable path will always be accessible no matter if a network’s service is intermittent or interrupted. Up to now Middle East’s high-speed internet was totally dependent on submarines cables which are more expensive both at deploying and servicing. The RCN infrastructure could be repaired in a few hours in the eventuality of a break down. Conversely, underwater cables normally take several days to be fixed.

The telecoms operators who during a ceremony held in Ankara (Turkey) signed for the RCN project are: Etisalat (UAE), Mobily (Saudi Arabia), Jordan Telecom/Orange (Jordan), Mada and Zain’s partnership (Jordan), the Syrian Telecommunications Establishment (STE, Syria), and a Turkcell’s subsidiary, Superonline (Turkey). During this ceremony, Consortium Chairman and Etisalat’s Executive Vice President Carrier & Wholesale, Ali Amiri said that the RCN cable would be an unrivalled infrastructure with reference to speed, quality, upgrading possibilities, redundancy and reliability and underlined that given the increased demand for intercontinental connectivity in the Middle East, the region’s governments are committed to encouraging investments in the ICT sector as a tool for improving their economies. Moreover, “operators are deploying Next-Generation Networks (NGNs) for both fixed-line and wireless environments which in turn allow an increasing volume of services to be provided to ever more consumers. These factors as well as the growing technical literacy of the local population and availability of rich local content are all driving the demand for ever more capacity. Etisalat is delighted to partner with six of the region’s leading operators in a project which will enhance the lives and increase the reach of over two billion people”, affirmed Ali Amiri.

The country that could benefit the most from this new ICT infrastructure is Jordan. Apart from internet access’s increased competition and prices reduction, the cable should allow Jordan to attract many investments in the ICT sector. In fact, although only 10% of the cable will run through the Jordanian territory, two points really push for Jordan to become a regional hub for the ICT sector. Firstly, the Jordanian part of the cable is exactly in the middle of the infrastructure and secondly, it will give Jordan more ICT capacity and redundancy. “The project is a strategic step as it will help make Jordan
an ICT hub exporting new developed internet content and becoming an incubator for new IT companies interested into value added services. Global ICT companies will be encouraged to open their regional offices in Jordan as the new cables increases Jordan’s capacity and redundancy” said Zain Jordan’s CEO Abdul Malek Al Jaber. At the same time, Jordan’s ICT Minister, Marwan Juma pointed out that the cable project will increase Jordan’s ICT capacities four times in this way really giving the country the opportunity to be the Middle Eastern regional center for mega-ICT companies.

The RCN cable is competing against another Middle Eastern new fiber-optic project: the JADI Link. This network will be connecting Jeddah (Saudi Arabia), Amman (Jordan), Damascus (Syria) and Istanbul (Turkey). The JADI Project is the result of the collaboration between Turk Telecom (Turkey), Saudi Telecom Company (STC, Saudi Arabia), Jordan Telecom (Jordan) and the Syrian Telecommunications Establishment (Syria). The JADI Link is a totally terrestrial alternative to the Mediterranean and Red Sea corridors. According to the signed agreement the four involved telecommunications operators will deploy the required physical connections between their national fiber-optic networks and in addition to this, they will be implementing a 200Gbps capacity expansion to their network systems in order to the JADI Link to be operational.