

Telecoms

Broadband please

Lebanon has long been plagued by archaic Internet speeds. But that may change by the end of the year. At a recent regional telecom conference held in Beirut, Samer Salameh, chairman and chief executive officer of Alfa, managed by Orascom Telecom, announced that his company would introduce mobile broadband services to the Lebanese market by the end of this year.

If implemented, Lebanon's mobile users will have the ability to download various types of media onto their mobile devices at speeds dozens of times faster than the current fixed service maximum. Since Lebanon's telecommunications industry still falls under government control, the state will foot the implementation bill. The new service will compliment the recent expansion undertaken by Lebanon's two mobile operators subsequent to renewing their management contracts with the Lebanese government. The move by the government will also allow the mobile industry to leapfrog the country's fixed telecommunications services.

"It's great," says Salam Yamout, member of the

board at the Lebanese Broadband Stakeholders Group. "I hope it is not a public relations stunt."

Alfa declined to comment on the issue.

It wouldn't be the first time mobile networks have bypassed the fixed service, said Riad Bahsoun, telecom expert at the International Telecommunications Union.

"In Lebanon, the priority and the focus has always been on mobile services rather than the fixed services," he said.

To use the new technology, however, customers will have to beef up their mobile devices.

"Service availability depends... on the availability of handsets and data cards on a mass scale," says Patrick Eid, board member and head of the market and competition unit at Lebanon's Telecommunications Regulatory Authority. "Unless end users' handsets and terminals are abundantly available at affordable prices, there will be no true mass market and true choice for consumers."

Bahsoun, however, is confident that proposed pricing models for the new service will penetrate the market.

"Prices will be high in the beginning but... will start to drop quite immediately," he said. The news is encouraging but nothing is assured as the formation of a new cabinet and selection of a telecommunications minister may further slow the process.