

## TRA official pledges improved Lebanese broadband

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BEIRUT: A senior official from the Telecom Regulatory Authority (TRA) on Friday touted plans to bolster Lebanese broadband at the US-Lebanon ICT Forum.

The officials emphasized “affordability” as a core component of efficient broadband and said that the achievement of broadband expansion depended heavily on stake-holders from different economic sectors.

These remarks came during the American Information and Communication Technology conference at BIEL, which was organized by the US Embassy.

According to a recent World Bank report, every 10 percent increase in internet penetration is estimated to result in a 1.38 percent increase in GDP growth. TRA officials lamented that Lebanon still lags far behind international averages in terms of household penetrations and that prices remain well above average prices.

“There is the first building block which is the infra-structural [building block] which will enable all of this to happen,” said TRA commissioner Patrick Eid. “Investment in the broadband network is necessary to offer advanced broadband services at a higher speed.”

Eid spoke about government initiatives – involving a revamping of regulation in the telecommunication industry, upgrades to a recently installed fiber optics grid, and the construction of a 13,000-kilometer submarine communications cable system, currently under way.

He believes that these projects will generate an exponential growth in internet bandwidth. During the opening ceremony of the Forum, Communications Minister Charbel Nahhas said he expected internet communications capacities to double by the end of the year.

In July, Nahhas unveiled \$60 million plans to install 710 kilometers of phone wires, as well as 2,750 kilometers of fiber optics. The project will take place over the course of four phases in a 16-month period. The minister stated that within 18 months, 75 percent of Lebanese internet subscribers will enjoy up to 15 MB in high speed internet.

“We’re going to fiber our way into the future,” said adviser to Minister Nahhas, Mahmoud Haidar, at Friday’s talk, “whatever it takes, we are going there.”

Haidar emphasized that greatly improving governmental pricing and transparency is key to bolstering broadband. He promised audience members that “from now on” the ministry will do its best to be honest, and that it will aim to make pricing “seriously competitive, seriously linked to cost and seriously economically driven.”

“We would like to stop the monopoly of the state [over telecommunications in Lebanon], as well as avoid the anarchy of the private sector,” said Haidar while admitting that the increased involvement of private companies is a necessary precondition to creating a healthy ICT environment.

However he maintained that initial investments must come from the government. Haidar said that the ministry would invest in wireless communications, which both he and Eid believe to be “true” broadband generators, and then invite the private sector to “take over.”

Haidar stressed that the government has the responsibility to ensure that ICT services are equitably distributed among Lebanese citizens.

He also raised the possibility of the Lebanese government following in the US government’s footsteps by overhauling its communications legislation in accordance with new DSL standards. “Broadband for us has become more than a necessity. It is the promise for us to get out of our economic wasteland,” Haidar declared.

The presentations that the two TRA officials gave did not pass, however, without receiving a heavy blow of criticism from other ICT stakeholders. Two members of the private sector staged a heated intervention during the session that caused the discussion to spill over into a following session by more than 30 minutes.

Khaldoun Farhat of Terranet accused the officials of hiding the effects of government taxation of internet providers from their findings. He held over taxation to be largely responsible for Lebanon’s internet failings.