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E. and C. Africa cell users seen booming

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By Helen Nyambura-Mwaura
Reuters
Wednesday, May 16, 2007; 11:32 AM

NAIROBI (Reuters) - The number of mobile phone subscribers in east and central Africa will grow by 134 percent in the next five years, industry watchers forecast on Wednesday.

The penetration rate for the region is only 9 percent, they said, far lower than 21 percent for the rest of Africa.

"We expect 75 million new subscribers in east and central Africa by 2011," Thecla Mbongue, a research analyst at Informa Telecoms and Media research group, told Reuters.

The low penetration rate is due to low usage in Ethiopia -- the most populous country in the region, with about 79 million people -- where a state operator is the sole mobile service provider, Mbongue said.

Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan also pulled down the regional figures, due to civil unrest and an universalized sector respectively, she said.

"The key to Ethiopia will be liberalization," Mbongue said. "Although Ethiopian authorities have not said anything officially, I think this will happen within the next five years."

Ethiopia had only a million subscribers at the end of 2006. But its user numbers grew at 131 percent in 2006, the fastest rate in the region, she said.

Sudan's subscriber base swelled by 84 percent in the same period compared with 65 percent in DRC and 60 percent in Tanzania.

Mbongue said Nigeria would overtake South Africa in terms of subscribers by the end of the year, without giving numbers. Nigeria has a penetration rate of 21 percent compared with 76 percent in South Africa's more mature market.

Regulatory bodies should offer unified licenses to hasten the uptake of new technologies by operators, Mbongue said.

Only firms in Tanzania, Uganda and Botswana have so-called converged licenses, which allow them to build an infrastructure and give services on a single license, she said, adding that Kenya and South Africa were planning to follow suit.

"When they deploy technology like 3G or networks like CDMA, their license will not restrict them. Converged licenses allow operators to widen their services and not limit themselves to mobile voice," Mbongue said.

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