

Terrible tariffs shatter chatter

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Zimbabweans have drastically reduced their mobile phone talk time after a 1 000% increase in tariffs on 31 May 2008 that freed up heavily congested networks crippled by an unrelenting economic crisis.

Unviable tariffs had made it cheaper for Zimbabweans managing to get through to talk for hours on the phone, congesting the three mobile networks - Econet Wireless, Telecel Zimbabwe and Net*One - and making it very difficult for others to make calls.

Douglas Mboweni, Econet CEO, said thanks to the old rates, Zimbabweans were spending 200 hours per month on the phone, against an international average of 40 hours. That meant they blocked others wanting to use the networks, whose base stations are often down for hours due to power outages in the country. It can take as many as 20 attempts to get through on a mobile number, or, as one subscriber says, as long as it takes for the phone battery to run out of power trying to make a call.

However, the new rates have eased congestion as many users switched to SMSing rather than talking and racking up huge new bills under the new tariff set-up.

Godfrey Mutanga, an informal market dealer, says he SMSes clients, reserving chats for “when it’s important”.

Meanwhile, mobile networks have already applied to the regulatory authorities for another tariff review - of as much as 1 000% again. Why? Because inflation has already eroded the value of the new tariffs, and in a week, the networks might find themselves battling congestion again, said an officer with one of the mobile networks.

Tariffs went up from between Z\$5-\$7m to between Z\$58-\$70m per call per minute for domestic calls, with regional and international calls going up from around Z\$10m to as high as Z\$1.5bn. Text messages now cost between Z\$30m and Z\$50m.

During the week, the Zimbabwe dollar has fallen drastically on the official market, severely affecting the tariffs in US dollar terms.

An Econet subscriber said he was happy with higher tariffs because he could now easily make calls.

“At times you have to make important calls and the networks are jammed. You can’t even call an ambulance. People have to learn talking less on the phone and only when it’s important not just for gossip,” said the subscriber only identifying himself

as Rumbidzai.

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