

31 October 2006

## **Landlocked Country May Soon Become Top ICT Hub in Africa**

By Odhiambo Orlale

All public schools in Rwanda are expected to join the information super-highway by the end of next year. Already, half of the primary and secondary schools have embraced the new technology, which has been given priority by the Government under its 2020 vision programme.

Out of 2,300 primary schools, 1,138 have at least one computer each, with 400 secondary schools fully equipped and 39 of them having wireless internet access.

The Rwandese Government has supplied the 400 schools with 4,000 desktop computers and 4,000 power units (UPS), in addition to training 2,000 teachers in basic computing.

The on-going programme includes tertiary and university students, and is part of a national IT policy to make the tiny Great Lakes nation, which is still recovering from the 1994 genocide, a force to reckon with globally. Over 800,000 people were killed in the genocide.

Currently, the land-locked country of eight million people depends heavily on agriculture as its major foreign exchange earner.

But this is expected to change, as Rwanda could soon be the leading ICT-endowed state on the continent. Under the programme launched by President Kagame last year, over 60 per cent of primary and secondary schools have been equipped with hardware and IT instructors.

In the next phase, all urban and rural schools will get the machines, which will be connected to electricity lines, generators or solar power.

More than 400 students have been benefited from full scholarships to study information technology in India, South Africa and the United States. They are expected to graduate and return home to take up civil service jobs to promote the ICT programme.

Dr Shem Ochuodho, the immediate former director of the Rwanda Information Technology Agency, says all ministries have been mandated to appoint ICT directors to promote the programme.

Dr Ochuodho, who is now an ICT advisor to the Ministry of Infrastructure, says each of the 17 ministries is required to spread the ICT gospel.

Earlier, Dr Ochuodho served as MP for Rangwe (1997-2002). He was then appointed by President Kibaki as the managing director of Kenya Pipeline Corporation for over a year.

The new technology has also been embraced by the Rwandese Cabinet, where ministers attend meetings on Wednesdays armed with laptops. The public and the Press are free to log on to the Government website 24 hours later and find resolutions of such meeting posted there.

Unlike in Kenya, the Rwandese Senate and Parliament have a website which is updated daily. A similar proposal for Kenya was shelved last year after a brief test run, following protest and controversy after the media published details of MPs' academic and professional backgrounds.

But plans are at an advanced stage by Speaker Francis ole Kaparo to officially launch the much-awaited website next month, as part of the Rapid Results Initiative headed by a sub-committee chaired by Mr. Harry Owino, a senior systems analyst.

Last year, the national management committee of the Constituency Development Fund launched its website, which shows details of how each of the 210 constituencies received the Sh7 Billion Kitty, and which projects were supported.

The Rwandese Government wants to cut costs of stationery and boost service delivery to the public. All ministries are inter-connected by fibre optics to cut telephone bills and improve transparency.

The ministers are appointed from the private sector by the President. They are all professionals who must be endorsed by the Senate.

Over 100 ICT directors have been deployed to all the State corporations, and the two chambers of Parliament, the Senate and the Lower House, so far.