

theregion

UAE needs more fast Web links

Trade group pushes high-speed hook-ups

Country leads the way in Middle East with fibre-optic connections and its new network

David George-Cosh

The UAE leads the Middle East in fibre-optic internet connections but telecommunications operators should invest more to increase the number of the high-speed hook-ups in the region, the head of a telecoms business group says.

Fibre-optic connections can transmit a near-unlimited amount

Fibre uptake

FTTH subscribers in the Middle East

	Number of subscribers	FTTH-ready buildings
Bahrain	1,000	4,500
Egypt	500	35,000
Jordan	200	200
Kuwait	500	2,000
Lebanon	300	4,500
Qatar	500	700
Saudi Arabia	3,122	11,622
UAE	62,700	1,065,000

Note: FTTH (fibre to the home) networks not yet available in Iran, Iraq, Oman, Palestine, Syria and Yemen.

Source: FTTH Council

of data using pulses of light and are replacing copper wiring for broadband internet networks. The UAE will join an elite group of countries including Japan and South Korea when it connects most of its residents to a fibre-to-the-home (FTTH) network by the end of this year.

Parts of Dubai, such as Dubai Internet City and the Dubai Marina, have been tied to a fibre network since 2002, and Etisalat has pledged to spend Dh5 billion (US\$1.36bn) building a national FTTH network.

The UAE has 91 per cent of the Middle East's fibre-optic connections. Etisalat's planned infrastructure-sharing programme with du, which is scheduled to begin next month, could increase that percentage. Overall, the Middle East lags the rest of the world in FTTH, with about 65,000 connections compared with several million in Europe. About 30 projects are under way in the Middle East that could increase that number, said Hartwig Tauber, the director general of the FTTH Council Europe.

"The interesting thing is that only



Etisalat has pledged to invest as much as Dh5 billion to build a national fibre-to-the-home network. Bloomberg

a few of them are bigger projects while the rest of them are smaller, pilot projects where the operators try to see how they can deploy fibre," Mr Tauber said. But many of those networks will not be operational for several years as operators decide on where to put their money and what technologies, such as next generation wireless infrastructure, to roll out.

"It's actually surprising for us knowing the thirst for fibre in the Middle East and it still seems that the implementation of the networks are quite slow," Mr Tauber

said. "By comparison, in the UAE with Etisalat and du, there is already 1 million homes connected to fibre. It's a very different situation."

Mr Tauber said the FTTH Council would open a permanent office in Dubai to promote the technology.

"The benefit that the region has as opposed to, say, Europe is that operators here have to build infrastructure anyhow to make it possible to use it for internet and if they're doing that, there's a good case to install fibre connections," he said. Selling the region's op-

erators on the benefits of fibre may be a tough task. Many of them are opting to go wireless instead of laying down optical cable underground as demand increases with the growing popularity of powerful multimedia devices such as the BlackBerry or the iPad.

Saudi Arabia is leading the way to wireless in the Gulf as more residents are expected to sign up to broadband internet on their mobile devices than on personal computers in the next year.

While there may be a technological shift occurring, Mr Tauber said

the benefits of FTTH connections outweighed the more expensive wireless technologies.

"For us, wireless is complementary to the fixed networks," he said.

"Having a mobile network, especially in rural areas, is a good first step to enabling communication. But you can only do so much with wireless.

"Imagine uploading a YouTube file in HD over your mobile? The bandwidth can be handled better over fibre."

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