

## **Telecoms Service Providers Face the Regulator**

**By Osman Larry Fofanah**

The telecom service providers could not find a common ground in so far as the issues tabled before them by the regulator are concerned. This is in connection with an interactive session held on 20<sup>th</sup> February, 2014 at NATCOM headquarters to chart the way forward in the Sierra Leone telecom industry. The session was chaired by the new Chairman / Commissioner of NATCOM, Dr. Tom Obaleh Kargbo. Hectic though it was, the Telecoms Service Providers grasped the new approach to breach of regulatory procedures adopted by the Regulator. It is no longer business as usual; the atmosphere created in that meeting compels the conclusion. NATCOM required the telecom service providers to do more in their operations or have their licences suspended. It was quite clear from the mood and facial expression of Chairman Kargbo that NATCOM is ready to leave no stone unturned in ensuring compliance with regular payments of regulatory fees, cost of bandwidth, quality of service and submission of timely reports.

The warm embrace given to the telecom service providers and compliments to the former Chairman of NATCOM, Arc Siray A. Timbo could not stop Dr. Tom Obaleh Kargbo to hammer home the message that even though he is ready to erect on the existing building blocks, he is also prepared to trim all the rough edges not properly trimmed over the years. He stressed on consumer protection as his watch word. He believes NATCOM should dialogue and consult with telecom operators time after time; more so when it has the mandate to ensure players play the game by the rules. He has the strong conviction that the telecom service providers obtain the licences to provide the requisite services. He was very categorical about NATCOM's new measures in the payment of regulatory fees in January of every year. "We regulate to facilitate growth in the industry," he said, with an emphatic tone. He reminded the telecom service providers of their obligation to put one percent of their annual operating revenue to the Universal Access Development Fund (UADF). "We will enforce that obligation," he noted.

NATCOM's Director General, Mohamed Bangura, told telecom service providers to be mindful of the central government's interest in the sector and insisted on the obligatory and timely submission of financial statements to the Commission every year. NATCOM's Director of Legal and Licences Affairs, Musa Nur Kamara delved on the repeated breach of fundamental conditions upon which licences are issued. In the same vein, Deputy Director General of NATCOM, Senesie Kallon, admonished ISPs to submit timely information on book accounts, industry data, number of minutes on both on-net and off-net calls, how many millions of minutes terminated in Sierra Leone, and how many minutes originate herein, etc. This, he said is not only for NATCOM as end point but also for the government of Sierra Leone for planning purpose, the World Bank and IMF. He did not take it slightly with the little penetration of the internet outside Freetown.

NATCOM believes the cost of bandwidth sold to end-users is high and that the telecom service providers sell way above what is rationed. Senesie Kallon again observed that before

now the price of the megabit per second (mbps) was high because the single carriage then was the international bandwidth satellite. With the operation of the fibre, he went on, there should be a drastic fall but that has not been generally visible. NATCOM's cards are on the table to put a cap on the price of bandwidth there by stemming the act of staking unrealistic prices.

In the Quality of Service, NATCOM is insistent on Key Performance Indicators (KPI) compliance. NATCOM's Director of Engineering, Victor Findlay shed lights on the availability, speed and volume of the services; adding, the end-users are not getting what they pay for.

The telecom service providers on the other hand expressed concerns over issues bordering on VIOP, representation in the UADF, the international gateway, self regulation, dubious activities in the market that make them struggle to stay afloat. Nonetheless, they promised to develop a position within ten working days and get back to NATCOM.