

National News

Officials say regulation is key as Uganda navigates a rapidly evolving digital landscape.

BY MARTIN LUTHER OKETCH

The government has defended its continued suspension of Facebook in Uganda, insisting the decision is rooted in regulatory compliance concerns, even as it unveils broader plans to tighten oversight of the country's fast-evolving digital space, including Artificial Intelligence (AI) and online commerce.

Facebook has remained inaccessible in Uganda since January 11, 2021, when authorities blocked the platform ahead of the General Election, accusing it of bias and amplifying disinformation.

Speaking during a press briefing at the Uganda Media Centre yesterday, the State Minister for ICT and National Guidance, Mr Godfrey Baluku Kabbyanga, said the government has not shifted its position and will only restore access once the social media giant complies with local laws.

"Negotiations between the government and the social media platform have been ongoing for nearly four years, but no agreement has yet been reached," Mr Kabbyanga said.

"The suspension will only be lifted when they meet the conditions set by the government. All companies operating here must comply with our laws," he added.

In the same briefing, government raised concern over the rising spread of misinformation and the sale of uncertified products through online platforms.

Mr Kabbyanga warned that individuals and businesses using digital platforms to promote false information or misleading advertisements risk facing penalties under existing laws.

The Uganda National Bureau of Standards (UNBS) is expected to intensify enforcement against traders marketing uncertified goods online.

Mr Kabbyanga said the move is intended to protect consumers and maintain standards, rather than restrict freedoms.

"Freedom of expression does not extend to harming others or violating established standards," he said, cautioning against interpreting enforcement actions as suppression of rights.

Government also revealed that it is taking steps to regulate emerging technologies, with Artificial Intelligence now firmly on its radar.

Govt defends Facebook ban, moves to regulate AI

nologies, with Artificial Intelligence now firmly on its radar.

Mr Kabbyanga disclosed that an AI task force has already been established to study global trends and recommend an appropriate legal and policy framework for Uganda.

The team, composed of technical experts, is expected to guide government not only on AI governance but also on other frontier technologies such as quantum computing.

Officials said a comprehensive digital law is also being developed to consolidate existing ICT-related legislation into a single framework that can respond to rapid technological changes.

Stakeholders from government and the private sector are already engaged in consultations to align innovation with national priorities.

Platforms such as the Chief Information Officers (CIO) Forum are being used to bring together industry leaders to exchange ideas and promote locally developed solutions.

While acknowledging the growth of innovation among Uganda's youth, officials pointed to commercialisation as a major challenge.

Mr Kabbyanga said government alone cannot sustain the innovation pipeline and called for stronger private sector participation.

"There is a lot of innovation happening, but scaling it requires investment. We need the private sector to come on board," he said.

New partnership

The briefing also marked the launch of a partnership between the Uganda Media Centre and the National Information Technology Authority-Uganda (NITA-U), aimed at improving government communication.

The collaboration seeks to strengthen the dissemination of government programmes and achievements both locally and internationally.

Uganda Media Centre Executive Director Alan Kasujja described the partnership as a strategic step towards better coordination and resource mobilisation. "We are mobilising resources to ensure effective communication of Uganda's story, both



State Minister for ICT and National Guidance Godfrey Baluku Kabbyanga speaks at the Media Centre in Kampala yesterday. PHOTO/COURTESY

locally and globally. I thank NITA-U for responding to our call. This partnership will help us ensure Uganda takes its rightful place in the world. We are not doing PR; we are building a nation," he said.

Mr Kasujja said effective communication will be critical in supporting government's ambition to grow the economy to \$500 billion by 2040.

As part of the partnership, NITA-U has provided the Media Centre with 25 laptops to enhance information flow and support journalists.

NITA-U Executive Director Hatwib Mugasa said the high cost of ICT services and devices remains a key barrier to adoption across institutions and households.

"This is where we are coming in as a government to lower those costs. We have lowered the cost of Internet and the cost of developing solutions under the Uganda Digital Acceleration Programme. We are developing free e-services for different sectors," Dr Mugasa said.

Dr Mugasa said government agencies are also benefiting from free hosting at the National Data Centre, which currently supports about 300 systems.

The facility is being upgraded to accommodate up to 800 systems, a move expected to further streamline government digital services.

"Currently, we have about 300 government systems at the National Data Centre, and we intend to increase this to about 800 once the upgrade is complete," he said.

Dr Mugasa said discussions are ongoing with the Ministry of Finance to re-

GOVT DIGITAL AGENDA

- Regulate Artificial Intelligence and emerging technologies.
- Consolidate ICT laws into one framework.
- Expand e-government services.
- Promote local innovation and digital solutions.
- Strengthen oversight of online trade and content.

duce the cost of smart devices, which are essential for accessing digital services.

He said government is considering tax waivers or reductions on basic smartphones to make them more affordable to low-income earners.

Dr Mugasa said there are already facilities in Namunye and Mbale Industrial Park assembling electronic devices, with some components sourced locally and others imported at lower cost.

Expanding connectivity

On internet access, Dr Mugasa said government interventions have already led to a reduction in prices over the years.

"When the Regional Communication Infrastructure Project was commissioned, internet prices dropped significantly—from \$70 to \$30 per Mbps per month," he said.

He added that ongoing infrastructure projects, including those funded under the Uganda Digital Acceleration Programme and by the Chinese Exim Bank, are expected to further reduce costs.

According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the cost of 1GB of mobile data in Uganda stood at 16.61 percent of Gross National Income per capita in 2017, far above the UN Broadband Commission's recommended threshold of 2 percent.

Dr Mugasa said the government is working to close this gap through infrastructure investment, policy reforms and partnerships with the private sector.

