

Parliament

Regulation

Communication

By Mary Karugaba

Officials from the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) were yesterday tasked with explaining why they reviewed the licence fees and fines for communication services without following the right procedures.

According to the MPs on the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) committee, UCC was supposed to increase and then gazette the new charges after tabling the regulations in Parliament for scrutiny, according to the recently amended UCC Act.

The new charges were published in the Uganda Gazette and took effect on November 3.

"It is surprising that you decided to run faster than the minister and do things the other way round. According to the new Act, you were supposed to present the regulations to Parliament first, before you implement new charges," Annet Nyakecho (Tororo North), the committee chairperson, said.

"You even never involved your ministers to find out when the regulations would be tabled," she added.

In a letter to the committee, Vincent Bagire, the ICT ministry's permanent secretary, asked the MPs to ask UCC to explain the increment since the minister had not issued any regulations.

"We would like to advise that to the best of our knowledge, the minister has not issued any regulations. In fact, the regulations are being considered

MPs question UCC officials over reviewing licence fees

and once the process is done, we shall follow the due process in accordance with the law," Bagire said.

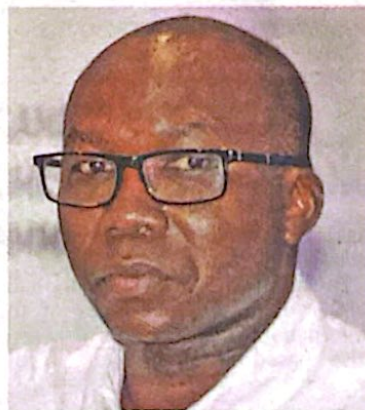
"We, therefore, request that UCC should appear and explain the matters related to the new licence framework fees and fines," he added.

Nyakecho noted that although the committee was not opposed to the increment, proper procedures must be followed and the relationship between the two parties (the minister and UCC) is harmonised.

The new licence structure, which has charged in dollars, has categories for radio, TV, two-way radio services, telecoms, radio transmission links, access bands, film industry and fines.

Under TV stations, a public infrastructure provider for national is required to pay a one-off initial entry fee of \$100,000 (about sh360m) and an annual licence fee of \$30,000 (about sh108m).

A public infrastructure provider for regional is required to pay an initial entry fee of \$25,000 (about sh90m) and an annual licence fee of \$3,000 (about sh10m).



UCC's Fred Otunnu

A content service provider for free-to-air for a national licence for single stream is required to pay an initial entry fee of \$20,300 (about sh80m) and annual licence fee of \$17,600 (about sh60m) per stream.

A content service provider for online broadcasting costs \$8,100 (about sh30m) per stream.

MPs Peter Ssematimba (Busiro

South) and Barnabas Tinkasimire (Buyaga West), who own radios, wondered why UCC charges in dollars when they operate in a shillings environment.

UCC acting executive director Fred Otunnu defended the commission's decisions, saying the new charges were approved by the board and the Act gives UCC powers to exclusively charge fees or impose fines.

"There is nothing that we did. The Act empowers the commission to independently review its licence fees and licence regime from time to time in order to respond to the ever-changing sector dynamics," he said.

"We could not wait for the regulations because we had no control over when the minister would table them in Parliament," Otunnu added.

He explained that UCC has, however, since 2008 not reviewed the licence and spectrum fees, yet with the inflation rate over the years, some of the fees that are currently charged are not adequately reflective of the current economic conditions.

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But the committee members insisted that the two parties resolve their differences and then come back with one position.

The committee also agreed to summon the sector ministers to explain why they have delayed to table the regulations.