

Icasa extends use of emergency radio frequency spectrum

South Africa's telecoms regulator, the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (Icasa), will extend the use of temporary radio frequency spectrum issued to licensees for another three months, it said on Thursday, 27 June amid delays in the auction of new permanent spectrum.



Photo by Mario Caruso on Unsplash

The extension means that mobile operators will continue to deliver faster connectivity to customers to meet a surge in data demand as large numbers of people continue to work from home.

Consumers will also continue to enjoy free access to certain critical health and education websites, as per the conditions of the emergency spectrum.

The extension will be from June 1 to August 31, Icasa said in a statement as it announced amendments to the ICT Covid-19 National Disaster regulations.

Licensees were supposed to return the temporary spectrum to the regulator no later than 31 March, by which time Icasa was meant to have auctioned permanent spectrum, but a high court halted the planned auction in March because the process was deemed unlawful and irrational.



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"The three-month extension affords an opportunity for all stakeholders to find a resolution to the spectrum litigation impasse," Icasa chairperson Keabetswe Modimoeng said.

"Unfortunately, at some stage, we will not be able to continually extend these temporary spectrum assignments when a more permanent licensing route is struck through litigation."

Modimoeng urged active litigants to participate in the ongoing settlement negotiations to resolve the stand-off because the regulator cannot perpetuate a pandemic-specific temporary arrangement to a point where it amounts to a 'backdoor' spectrum licensing regime.

Operators Telkom and MTN are the main litigants.

Icasa said licensees of the temporary spectrum will offer free connectivity access to virtual classroom platforms for a period of 17 months from deployment.

Approved equipment used in temporary spectrum shall be decommissioned within three months after the expiry of the temporary licences, while the duration of all spectrum sharing agreements shall not exceed the duration of these licences, it added.

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