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By Proffesor Ndawonde

Johannesburg - The Department of Communications has introduced the Digital Dzonga Council, a team of experts set up to manage South Africa's migration from analogue to digital terrestrial broadcasting.

Introduced on Tuesday by the Communications Minister, General Sipiwe Nyanda, the council was appointed in 2008 as an advisory body to oversee South Africa's migration to digital terrestrial broadcasting.

Minister Nyanda said the council would further provide a forum for discussion and a platform for coordinating all decisions taken relating to the digital migration campaign. It will also give updates on the migration process on behalf of government.

Council members include officials from the department, consumer groups, various broadcasters such as the South African Broadcasting Corporation, eTV and M-Net, manufacturers, the national signal distributor Sentech and the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa.

Currently, television and radio signals are broadcast on an analogue platform, which requires a large amount of bandwidth to transmit picture and sound information. This limits the amount of signals that can get through at any time.

However, digital signals require much less bandwidth, therefore more channels can be broadcast at the same time, with brighter, sharper picture and better sound.

Chairperson of the Digital Dzonga, Lara Kantor, said digital television would bring so much more to South Africa through more choice of channels and content.

"The additional content will deliver more education, information, cultural, sport and entertainment programming.

"It's exciting that South Africa will be counted among the most advanced countries in the world, going digital in a way that will meet our country's unique challenges," she said.

South Africa is currently in the process of converting the broadcast of television broadcasting signals from analogue to digital technology. The digital signal was switched on, on 1 November 2008, and the analogue signal will be switched-off on 1 November 2011.

The period of dual illumination, wherein both analogue and digital signals are available, has allowed for members of the public to get digitally compliant television sets that work on digital broadcast signal.

Set top boxes will be available for those South Africans who do not have digitally compliant television sets. Set Top Boxes convert the digital signal to analogue.

These devices will be sold around R700. However, poor households will qualify for a R400 subsidy from government using the universal service fund. They will be available from retail stores during the first half of 2010.

The migration from analogue to digital signal is happening all around the world, according to timelines agreed with the framework of an International Telecommunication Union treaty.

The body decided that protection for analogue signals cease in 2015. Member states were given time lines per region to comply with the decision. - BuaNews