

Internet cable from Cuba to Jamaica comes online

The Associated Press

HAVANA (AP) — A new branch of the Venezuela-to-Cuba undersea fiber-optic cable has reportedly come online, linking the island to nearby Jamaica, increasing Cuba's potential international communications bandwidth and providing a backup for the main line.

Doug Madory of Internet analysis firm Renesys told The Associated Press on Tuesday that he detected new traffic between Cuban state telecom monopoly Etecsa and Cable & Wireless Jamaica beginning May 13.

"They're gaining some physical diversity there, so if something were to happen to the main segment going to Venezuela, then they have this backup," Madory said.

The ALBA-1 cable strung from Venezuela to Siboney beach in eastern Cuba went online in January, nearly two years after it was completed.

Previously, Cuba, which has the lowest online connectivity rates in the Western Hemisphere, had no hard-wired connection and relied solely on plodding satellite links.

It was not clear how much the new cable would augment Internet capacity, but island officials have boasted in the past that the ALBA-1 project would bring a 3,000-fold boost.

"From a technical standpoint, these are good steps to increase their connectivity to the world and hopefully one day get off of satellite," Madory said.

Some of the island's rare high-speed Internet connections have improved noticeably, though dial-up users have seen little appreciable gain so far.

In the wake of the ALBA-1's arrival, analysts and the government have said Cuba still has much work to do building networks to deliver that connection to end users.

"It will be necessary to invest in internal telecommunications infrastructure," Etecsa said in January. It added that it plans "gradual growth of a service that we offer mostly for free and with social aims in mind."

Just 2.9 percent of Cubans said they have access to the full Internet, according to the most recent government statistics, though outside analysts say the figure is probably between 5 and 10 percent, accounting for unreported black-market sales of dial-up minutes. About 16 percent have access to a limited domestic intranet.

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Most Cubans who go online do so through school or work accounts. Home dial-up access is prohibitively expensive for the vast majority.

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