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Starlink in Africa

Challenges not to be missed

Why African countries must negotiate with Elon Musk's SpaceX.

By Beaugas Orain
DJOYUM of





Internet: Why African countries must coax, not repel Starlink

Several African countries have asked Starlink to stop marketing its satellite Internet services. Or are putting the brakes on Starlink's arrival. These include Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, DRC, Botswana, Guinea and South Africa, the home country of Elon Musk, owner of SpaceX, which markets Starlink.

To the surprise of several countries and numerous users, Starlink decided on April 16, 2024, to suspend its satellite Internet connection from April 30, 2024, in countries where it does not yet have the necessary authorizations. The message has been sent to many subscribers in countries where Starlink has not yet been officially installed. This includes the thousands of Cameroonians who use the service.

As if by chance, a situation which, even if it is also motivated by the demands of the American administration about security challenges, places Starlink in a position of strength.

And in a way, it forces African states and regulators eager for a good Internet connection to go the other way: closer to Starlink.

Starlink in Africa

The train is not to be missed

For several weeks now, as Digital Business Africa has been relaying information about the demands made by African states and telecoms regulators on Starlink, several digital professionals have been asking me whether I'm for or against banning Starlink in Cameroon and other African countries.

My answer is obviously yes. I'm against these requests to suspend Starlink services to African users. Because, at the request of these countries and their regulators, Starlink suspends or blocks the use of its satellite Internet services. This was the case in the DRC and is the option chosen by Starlink to avoid alienating the legal authorities of African countries.

Its recent decision to suspend its Internet service from April 30, 2024, in several countries around the world that have not authorized Starlink reinforces this choice, even if it can also be seen as SpaceX's need not to go against American needs and interests.

On the other hand, I would urge Starlink to respect the regulations applicable in African countries. That's why I think Cameroon and several other African countries should get in touch with Starlink right away to ask either for Internet connections to be restored and/or maintained in the country (users can connect while waiting for the authorization process to be finalized), or for Starlink's application to operate legally in these countries to be expedited by forcing their provisional deployment schedule in advance.

Here's why in eight points.

On the other hand, I would urge Starlink to respect the regulations applicable in African countries. That's why I think that Cameroon and several other African countries should approach Starlink now to request either the restoration and/or maintenance of the Internet connection in the country (users can connect while waiting for the finalization of the authorization process), or the acceleration of Starlink's application...



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Having understood the stakes, tricks, and contours of digital since 2010, Beaugas Orain DJOYUM has built his reputation in the field of strategic intelligence in the ICT, telecoms, and digital sectors in Africa. But also, in the fields of e-Reputation, Personal and Nation branding and digital marketing.

Over the years, he has made his mark in these fields both nationally and internationally. He shares his digital intelligence with decision-makers.

Through the training courses and studies carried out by the ICT Media STRATEGIES consultancy he runs, in association with several experts, he doesn't hesitate to share his knowledge with companies and individuals.

He is also the publishing director of Digital Business Africa (www.digitalbusiness.africa), the web platform for strategic information on ICT, Telecoms and Digital in Africa.

1 – Productivity of young people and businesses

Disrupting the Starlink connection means disrupting the productivity of local businesses and SMEs. Of course, what makes Starlink so special is the speed of the Internet connection, with speeds of up to 200 Mbps. What better way to increase the productivity and profitability of startups, SMEs, corporations, and independent consultants working remotely? The greater the productivity of an individual, SME or corporation, the greater the revenue to the government. Not only through higher taxes but also by reducing unemployment.

I soon see people telling me that local telcos and ISPs can also provide these speeds. But at what cost? And most importantly, at what speeds?

Ever since the March 2024 incident that crippled low-speed submarine optical cables in several African countries, the problems faced by subscribers and businesses that rely solely on these fiber-optic cables have been abundantly clear. The problem continues to this day, as the speeds offered to users and subscribers in the past are still not being met.

In Cameroon, one of the recommended solutions is to democratize the use of alternatives to submarine cables. “The establishment of diversified Internet access routes with satellite redundancy” is one of the measures recommended by Minpostel in Cameroon. STARLINK is one such solution.

What’s more, President Paul Biya has never stopped inviting young people to dare to go digital, as he did in his speech on February 10, 2023. At that time, he declared: *“I want to encourage you, however, to move with the times and take advantage of digital and technological development to improve your living conditions and those of your compatriots in the real world.”*

For many young people, the need for a smooth, affordable, high-quality Internet connection is the current pace of life. To take full advantage of the digital evolution. Starlink is just the beginning. *“Know how to use it, not only for your fulfilment but also for your contribution to the work of national construction, which is the great challenge facing all Cameroonians without exception,”* President Paul Biya advised young people in 2022, speaking of digital technology. Replace digital with Starlink in this quote from the President and it would retain its full meaning.

For their personal development and to better contribute to national building, many young people need a very good Internet connection. StarLink provides it.

Internet for All

2. Suspending the Starlink connection means widening the digital divide.

Suspending the Starlink connection also means depriving people living in rural areas of an Internet connection. We are aware that in many villages in Cameroon and Africa, it is difficult to connect to the Internet. Unlike in the cities. Specialists call this the geographical digital divide. Traditional telecommunications companies often decline (or take a long time to respond) in these areas due to low productivity and profitability.

Starlink is well-positioned to serve these areas. As a reminder, in France, on February 18, 2021, Arcep authorized Starlink Internet Services to use radio frequencies for a network open to the public, enabling it to provide fixed Internet access via satellite. However, on April 5, 2022, the French Conseil d'Etat annulled this authorization. Following a new request from Starlink, Arcep opened a public consultation on April 8, 2022, by the Conseil d'Etat's decision, to gather feedback from interested parties.

The responses and contributions to this public consultation demonstrated the value of the Starlink service for developing connectivity in mobile "white zones" or areas poorly served by fibre-optic networks. As a result, on May 25, 2022, Arcep once again granted Starlink a new authorization to use the frequencies requested.

"Thanks to Starlink, I can offer quality Internet access to my customers, given that my fibre connection is not scheduled for completion for another four years (at best) and that my ADSL access does not have sufficient bandwidth to provide a quality service. The cessation of the Starlink service would have a detrimental impact on my professional operations," stated a French user from the outskirts of Paris during the public consultation. A similar response can be observed in Cameroon and numerous other countries.

Coverage

**White zones
coverage**

**Quality Internet
access**

**A back-up for
fiber-optic networks**



3. Banning Starlink will deprive government of significant resources

In Nigeria, the cost of a Starlink kit is 378,000 naira (179,000 FCFA at the current rate of the naira on April 8, 2024), with delivery charges of 16,700 naira (7,800 FCFA at the current rate of the naira on April 8, 2024). A total of 394,700 Naira (185,500 FCFA at the current Naira rate on April 8, 2024). A monthly subscription to the service costs 38,000 Naira (17,800 FCFA at the current Naira rate on April 8, 2024).

Nigeria applies a 7.5% value-added tax to the payment of each monthly subscription. Excluding this tax, the monthly cost would be 35,348.84 Naira. According to the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC), as of September 2023, Starlink was already positioned as a competitive player with 11,207 active subscribers, ranking fourth in the Nigerian Internet Service Provider (ISP) subscriber market, behind Spectranet (113,747), Tizeti Network (19,126) and ipNX Nigeria (14,871).

By collecting VAT from these 11,207 active subscribers, Starlink collects approximately 15 million CFA francs per month for the Nigerian tax authorities. This does not include the various other taxes the operator must pay to the government. Not insignificant resources for a Nigerian economy in crisis with the fall of the naira.

The Nigerian market is not like Cameroon's or the DR Congo's. But banning Starlink also means depriving the government of these financial resources.

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“Let excellence be your brand...when you are excellent, you become unforgettable. Doing the right thing, even when nobody knows you’re doing the right thing will always bring the right thing to you.”

4 – Authorizing Starlink means encouraging local ISPs to excel

I can already see arguments being made that authorizing Starlink would also be a way of undermining local ISPs. This argument has also been made in Cameroon, where Camtel, the country's incumbent operator, could be in trouble. There is nothing wrong with that. But excellence comes from competition. If local ISPs and telecom operators such as Camtel, MTN, Orange, Airtel, Moov Africa and others adapt by offering good Internet service quality (by which I mean consistent speeds) at an affordable cost, Starlink will have a hard time attracting more of its already satisfied customers.

Even the purchase of this simple kit is a barrier. In Cameroon, where Starlink is not officially available, it currently costs between 350,000 and 700,000 CFA francs to purchase the antenna and its user kit. Not everyone can afford that. Especially in rural areas.

In Nigeria, when MTN launched its 5G service, it gave its subscribers interesting speeds, but they didn't rush to Starlink, which had better upload speeds than Starlink, which had better download speeds. As Cameroon's Minister Minette Libom Li Likeng pointed out, Camtel and the others need to upgrade now to avoid being swept away by the Starlink wave.

Anticipate...

5 – Government control over Starlink

Many people wonder what Starlink will do if an African state asks all telcos and ISPs to shut down Internet connections during periods of unrest or on the eve of the release of election results, as is often the case in certain African countries.

If we follow Starlink's current logic, the operator could comply with such government requests.

But to return to the case of France, this is not the point that concerns us. Starlink's current problem in France is that Article 13 of Law No. 2021-998 of July 30, 2021, on the prevention of terrorist acts and intelligence, authorizes the direct interception of communications sent or received by satellite communications subscribers using a "specific interception device" until June 2025 (**see box on page 13**).

As part of a judicial investigation, Starlink must be able to provide specialized intelligence agencies with access to its users' correspondence and call records at the request of a judge. Alternatively, it must allow the government to connect to its facilities (Starlink has two sites in France) an apparatus or technical device capable of intercepting correspondence sent or received by users via satellite, without having to ask Starlink for anything. Starlink has not yet responded positively to this request.

Perhaps negotiations with Starlink should include this requirement. Especially in a context where several African countries are facing security challenges and fighting terrorism.

In Cameroon, for example, Article 81 of Law No. 2010/013 of 21 December 2010, which governs electronic communications in Cameroon, authorizes persons to "intercept a private communication at the request of a judicial authority, by the laws in force".

In any case, this is a request that can be put on the table, even if the operator is not quick to respond favourably to such a request, as is the case in France.

6 – In the event of a disaster or conflict, Starlink remains indispensable

Finally, and most importantly, Starlink must be able to stand by the government in the event of a natural disaster or security crisis.

Starlink's strength in the event of a natural disaster or conflict is nothing short of phenomenal. The Ukraine-Russia war demonstrated the critical role Starlink can play in times of turmoil. After its telecommunications infrastructure was hacked or destroyed, Ukraine was left with only Starlink as the optimal solution for Internet connectivity.

But Starlink refused to provide its satellite internet services to Ukrainian forces in 2022 when they were planning an attack on Russian-occupied Crimea. So much so that the EU, which believes that "Ukraine should not have to rely on the whims of Elon Musk to defend its people," is planning to launch satellites like Starlink into space this year to improve satellite connectivity.

The space program will cost several billion dollars.

According to Politico, more than 3 billion euros have been raised from various EU programs and part of the European Space Agency (ESA) budget to launch this work, which will be able to provide a Starlink-like Internet connection in times of crisis.

The Pentagon had to pay SpaceX a substantial sum to get Starlink up and running in Ukraine. A contract was signed between the Pentagon and SpaceX to supply the terminals needed to operate Starlink in Ukraine. The contract is worth 23 million US dollars (about 14.1 billion Cfa Francs) for the period from June 2023 to May 2024, according to specialist media. African states would be hard-pressed to take such measures in the event of a crisis. *(continued next page)*



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Interception of electronic communications transmitted or received by satellite: what the law says in France

“Art. L. 852-3. - I. - Under the conditions set out in Chapter I of Title II of the present Book, and solely for the purposes set out in 1o, 2o, 4o and 6o of Article L. 811-3, the specialized intelligence services and the services referred to in Article L. 811-4 designated, about their missions, by a decree of the Conseil d'Etat issued after consultation with the Commission nationale de contrôle des techniques de renseignement, of an apparatus or technical device mentioned in 1o of article 226-3 of the penal code to intercept correspondence sent or received by satellite, when such interception cannot be implemented based on I of article L. 852-1 of the present code, for technical reasons or for reasons of confidentiality which prevent the operators or persons mentioned in article L. 851-1 from cooperating. Correspondence intercepted in this context is destroyed as soon as it appears that it has no link with the person concerned by the authorization and at the latest at the end of the period provided for in 1o of I of article L. 822-2.

“II. - Notwithstanding article L. 821-4, the authorization is issued for a maximum period of thirty days, renewable under the same conditions. It constitutes authorization to collect the information or documents mentioned in article L. 851-1 associated with the execution of the interception and its exploitation.

“III. - A department of the Prime Minister shall organize the centralization of intercepted correspondence and information or documents collected under I and II of this article. This centralization takes place as soon as communications are intercepted unless this is technically impossible. In this case, the data collected is encrypted as soon as it is collected and until it is centralized within the Prime Minister's department mentioned in the present paragraph. The request provided for in Article L. 821-2 shall specify the reasons preventing the immediate centralization of intercepted correspondence.

“Transcription and extraction operations on intercepted communications, to which the Commission Nationale de Contrôle des Techniques de Renseignements has permanent, full, direct and immediate access, are carried out within the Prime Minister's department mentioned in the first paragraph of this III.

“IV. - The maximum number of interception authorizations in force at any one time is set by the Prime Minister, after consulting the National Commission for the Control of Intelligence Techniques. The decision setting this quota and its distribution among the ministers mentioned in the first paragraph of Article L. 821-2, as well as the number of interception authorizations issued, are brought to the attention of the Commission.”

II. - I is applicable until July 31, 2025.

The Government shall submit an evaluation report on the application of these provisions to Parliament no later than six months before this deadline.

Source: Extracts from Article 13 of Act No. 2021-998 of July 30, 2021, on the prevention of terrorist acts and intelligence in France.



6 - In times of disaster and conflict, Starlink remains indispensable (continued)

Negotiating with Starlink also means taking these data and considerations into account so that the American operator is on the side of the state in a crisis and not on the side of the enemy.

Cameroon and many other African countries face terrorist threats and urgent security challenges. Let's not imagine that in the event of a crisis or security challenge, Starlink will side with the enemy (who also uses Starlink) or demand large sums of money to make its connection available or unavailable.

Quickly asking Starlink to shut down its service is to ignore these challenges and go into negotiations with points down on these issues. Because the American operator, given its power, could twist its little finger and wait for you to turn the corner.



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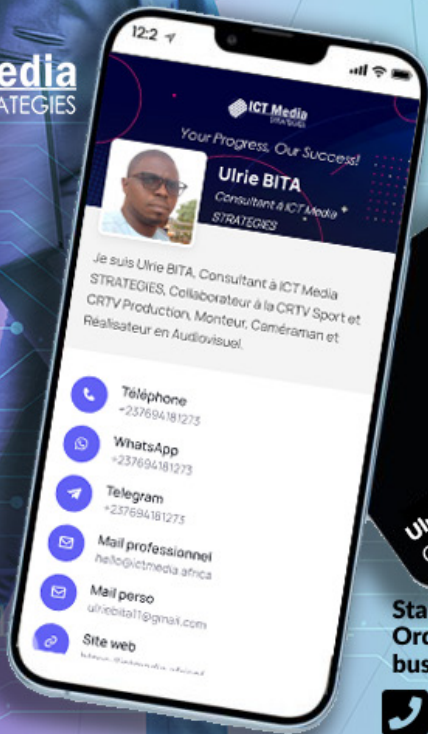
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7 – Let the connection go through and start negotiations

As mentioned above, Starlink has chosen to comply with requests from regulators and African states to suspend Starlink's Internet connection in their countries. This not only deprives those who have already purchased the Starlink kit of a good Internet connection but also makes them less competitive in a world where competition is fierce. A situation that will become even more acute from the end of April 2024.

All regulators can do is talk to Starlink without asking them to disconnect those who are already connected. With billions of dollars invested in its satellites in space, Starlink is a giant in a strong position.

According to astronomer Jonathan McDowell's countdown of Starlink's progress in space, as of March 2024, Space X will have a total of 5,504 Starlink satellites in orbit, with 5,442 of them operational. Starlink satellites have a lifespan of about five years, and SpaceX aims to expand this mega constellation to 42,000 satellites.

The Direct To Phone project to bring Internet connectivity directly to smartphones will add to Starlink's power.

What's more, African regulators may force Starlink's hand by asking them to officially launch sooner than their timetable suggests. Such an announcement would undoubtedly be welcomed by the public, digital professionals, and users already experimenting with the service.

According to the official timeline on the company's website, Starlink is scheduled to be officially installed in Cameroon and the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2025. In Cameroon, Starlink's application could be submitted in April 2024.

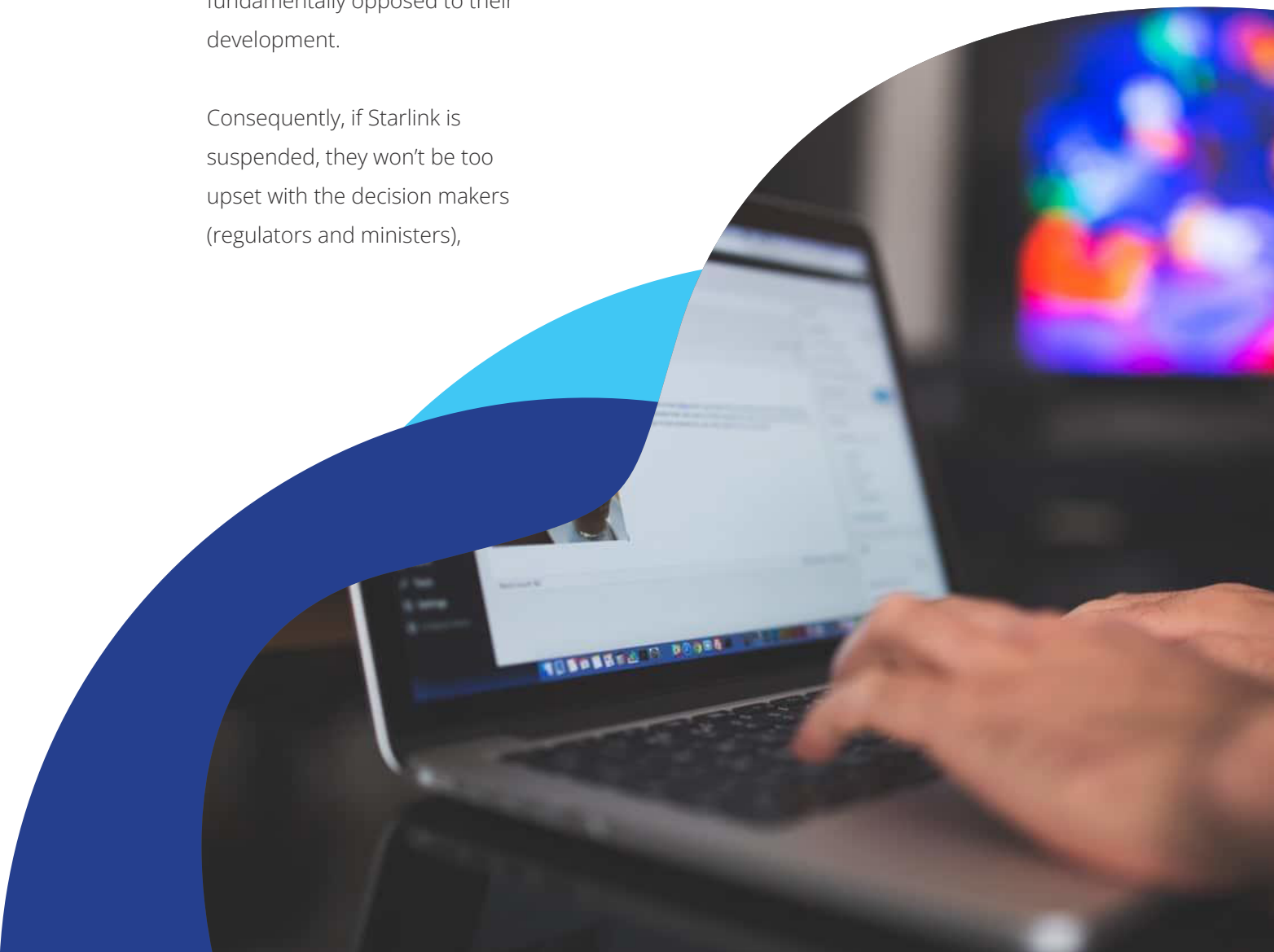
7 – Start of negotiations (continued)

In Africa, Starlink already has an official presence in seven countries: Nigeria, Mozambique, Zambia, Malawi, Kenya, Mauritius and Rwanda. According to the American operator, several African countries will be officially activated in 2024. In Central Africa, this is the case for Gabon, Congo and Chad.

The option of issuing a press release inviting Starlink to legally establish itself without having to suspend services has the advantage of showing users that the regulator is not fundamentally opposed to their development.

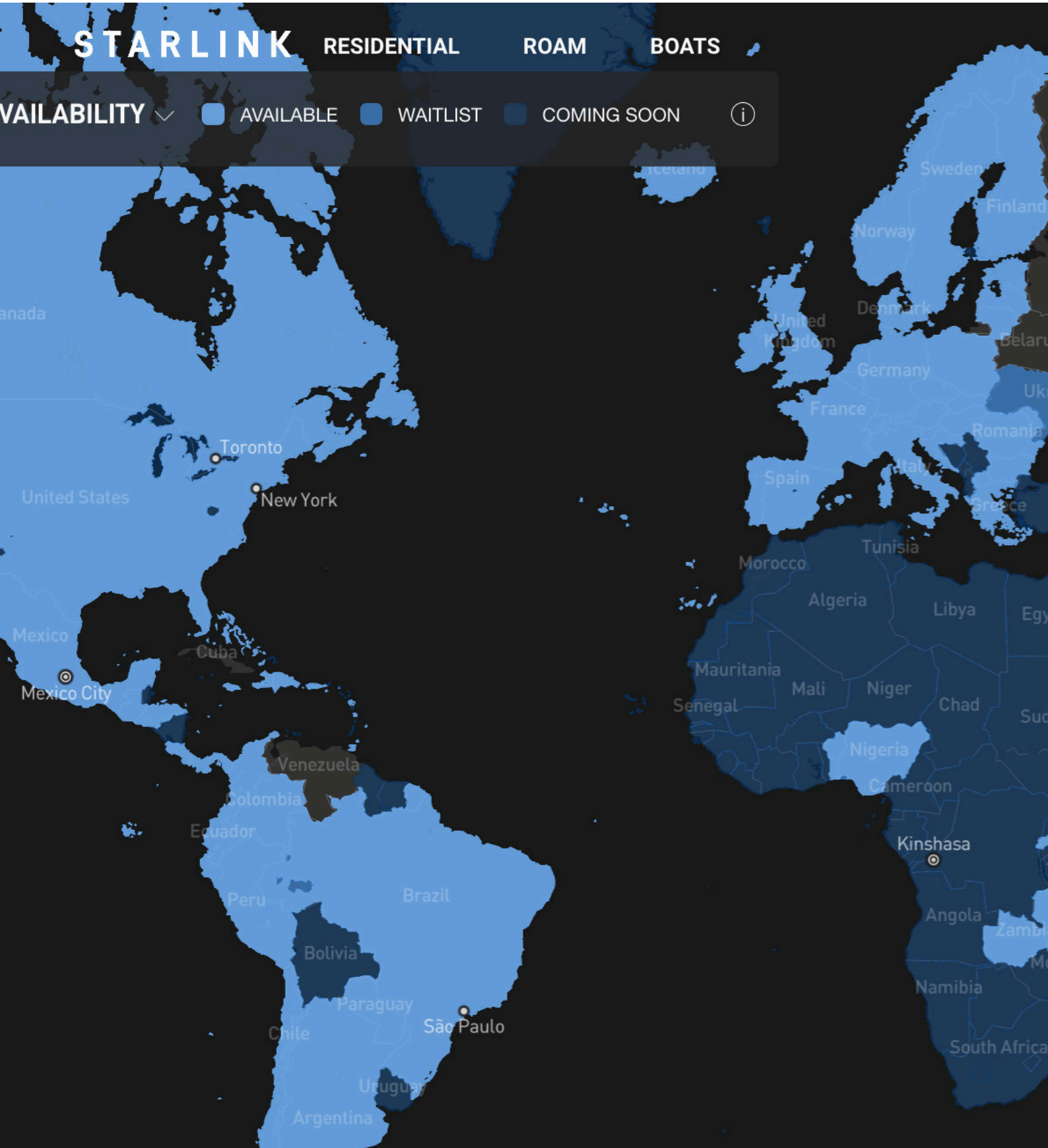
Consequently, if Starlink is suspended, they won't be too upset with the decision makers (regulators and ministers),

because the image that a direct ban on Starlink sends to users is that these decision makers are slowing down and preventing their productivity, which in turn reduces their profitability in a context where fiber connectivity problems persist. This, even if Starlink decides to suspend. France, for example, allowed this to happen by issuing the necessary authorizations in 2023 when the service was already in use. Further authorizations are still being negotiated in France, but the service is not suspended.

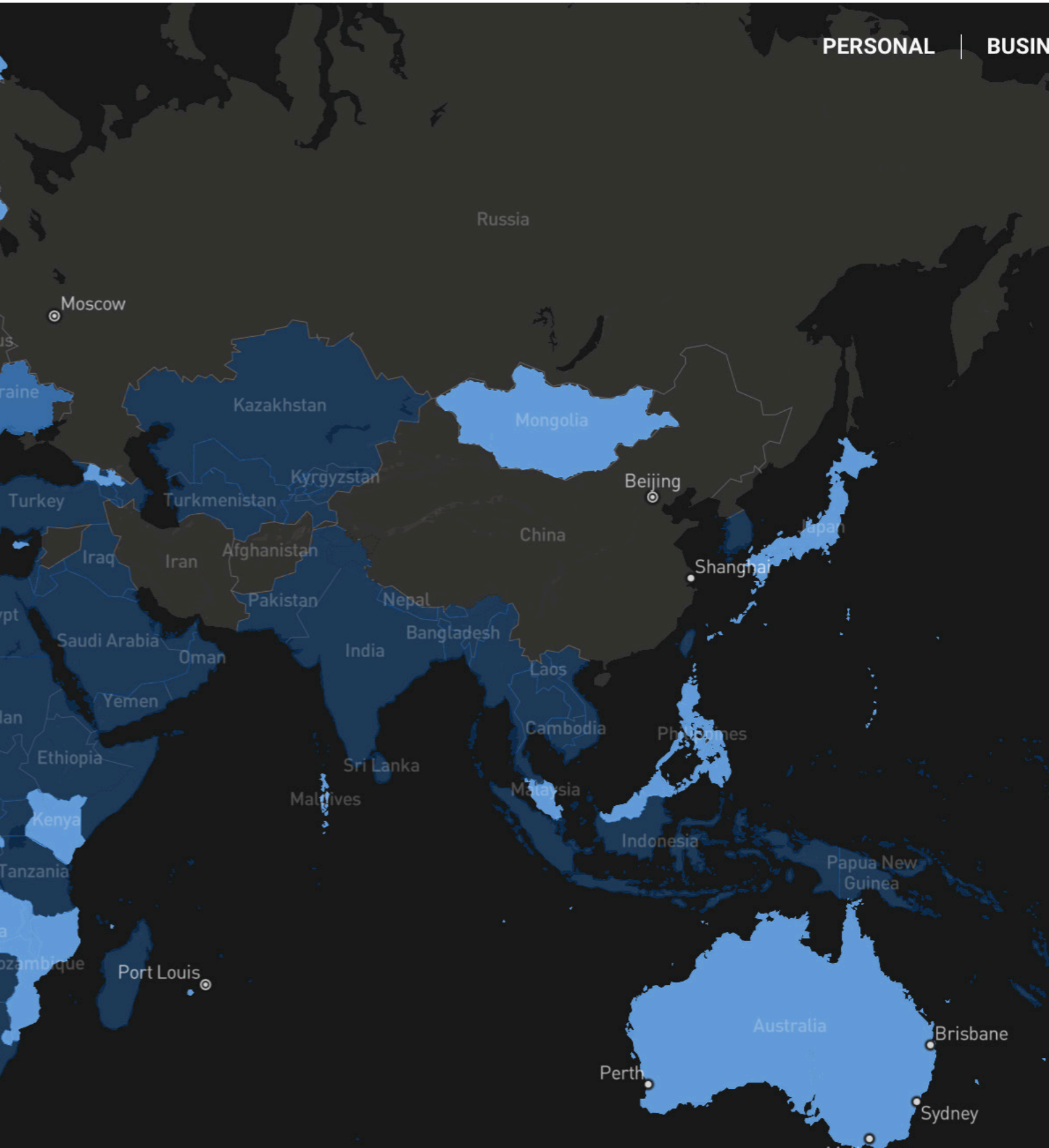


Starlink in Africa

Official presence in seven countries: Nigeria, Mozambique, Zambia, Kenya, Malawi, Mauritius, and Rwanda.



Source: starlink.com/map



8 – Negotiate lower prices for Starlink kits

Starlink's pricing policy varies from country to country. Subscribers in developing countries pay less than those in developed countries. Both in terms of kit purchase and monthly subscription. The pricing issue can still be addressed in the context of negotiations with Starlink.

In Nigeria, as mentioned above, the total price of the kit including delivery has been set at 394,700 Naira in January 2023 (185,500 FCFA at the current Naira rate on April 08, 2024). A monthly subscription to the service will cost 38,000 naira (17,800 FCFA at the current naira rate on April 08, 2024).

Recognizing that this is a high price for the rural population, the NCC (the telecom regulator) has entered negotiations with Starlink to reduce these rates. This is in line with its commitment to its National Broadband Plan for Nigeria (NNBP 2020-2025), which aims to increase broadband penetration in Nigeria to 90% by 2025 and well over 50% by the end of 2023. ***(Continued on next page)***



8 – Negotiations with Starlink (End)

After several rounds of negotiations, Starlink agreed to reduce the cost of the installation kit by 2%. The price went from 378,000 naira to 299,500 naira. Although the reduction only lasted a month, it allowed many Nigerians to purchase the kit at an affordable price. This type of negotiation should be on the agenda of African countries' discussions with Starlink.

In light of the above, African regulators and governments would do well to enter into negotiations with Starlink (and why not take a trip to Los Angeles in the US to meet with SpaceX).

These are all points that would benefit not only enterprises, SMEs and start-ups hungry for quality Internet connectivity, but also African states that spend huge sums to activate national emergency telecommunications plans and many others in times of crisis.

The competitiveness and interests of SMEs, corporations, individuals, and governments need to be protected. If you want to go far, take care of your horse. And the time to do so is now!





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