Fiber-optic cable linking Cuba to Venezuela, Jamaica for 2011

A $70 million undersea fiber-optic cable that will link Cuba with Venezuela and Jamaica is due to start operating in July 2011, Cuban media reported.

The project, which will involve laying two pairs of submarine cable over a distance of 5,340 kilometers (3,320 miles), will dramatically multiply Cuba's connectivity capacity, the official news agency Prensa Latina reported Friday, citing officials on the communist-ruled island.

Deputy Informatics and Communications Minister Alberto Rodriguez said the cable "will strengthen national sovereignty and security" in keeping with the integration aims of the eight-member Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas, or ALBA, an international cooperation organization founded by Cuba and close ally Venezuela in 2004.

The cable will enable "greater quality in info-communication services" and create "more favorable conditions for confronting future developments," Rodriguez said at the start of a business forum in Havana.

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The main cable will link the northern Venezuelan city of La Guaira with the southeastern Cuban city of Santiago de Cuba - a distance of 1,552 kilometers (965 miles) - and have a 640-gigabyte-per-second capacity, while the other segment will connect Cuba and Jamaica.

Waldo Reboredo, vice president of Telecomunicaciones Gran Caribe S.A., the Cuban-Venezuelan joint venture that will operate the undersea cable, said the "shark-proof" cable will be financed with Venezuelan bank loans as well as the company's own funds and have a lifespan of 25 years.

Reboredo added that the cable will allow the island to "multiply its current data, image and voice transmission speeds by 3,000," reduce operation costs by 25 percent and could be extended in the future to Haiti, the Dominican Republic and the Lesser Antilles.

But he noted that these technological advances "will not imply an end" to Cuba's current satellite-based Internet service, which he said is "all Havana is allowed due to U.S. hostility." Cuban authorities accuse Washington of preventing the island from accessing the Internet via undersea cables, one of which connects Cancun, Mexico and Miami and passes just 32 kilometers (20 miles) northwest of Havana.

Cuba has had a satellite-based Internet link since 1996 that offers a 65-megabyte-per-second upload bandwidth and a 124 Mb/s download bandwidth; according to the Cuban government, any modification of the channel must be licensed by the U.S. Treasury Department.

Havana blames the United States' decades-old economic embargo on Cuba for high costs, slow speeds and the fact that Internet service on the island is almost entirely restricted to companies and some professionals in fields such as health and culture. EFE rmo/mc