Econet announces plans to phase out 3G by end of 2027

Econet Wireless Zimbabwe has announced plans to switch off its 3G network by the end of December 2027, followed by a phased retirement of 2G as the company accelerates investment in faster 4G and 5G technologies.

The country's largest mobile network operator said retiring the older technologies would improve service quality, free up valuable spectrum and align its network with global trends.

"Our plan is to shut down 3G first, by the end of December 2027," said Econet Chief Executive Officer Dr Douglas Mboweni.

"Only a small proportion of our customers remain on 3G, as most are now using 4G and 5G. We are encouraging those still on the older technology to migrate to the higher-speed technologies."

Although 3G supports voice calls and basic internet services, it is increasingly inadequate for data-intensive applications such as video streaming, cloud services and artificial intelligence tools.

He said Econet will allow more time before retiring its 2G network because the technology remains widely used in rural areas, where some subscribers still rely on basic feature phones.

"We must give rural customers more time to replace their phones while supporting them with affordable handsets and flexible payment terms," Dr Mboweni said. "We will first upgrade network coverage and then help customers in rural communities migrate to 4G as the minimum standard. That work is already underway."

The company said maintaining several generations of mobile technology simultaneously placed pressure on spectrum allocation. Spectrum is a limited resource used by mobile operators to transmit voice and data services.

Reallocating the spectrum currently used by 2G and 3G will enable Econet to expand its 4G and 5G capacity, improve data speeds and strengthen overall network performance.

Econet has already ordered much of the equipment required for the upgrade as it steps up its 4G and 5G infrastructure expansion across the country. It is also developing an independent power system to improve network resilience amid persistent electricity supply challenges.

Dr Mboweni said the wider network modernisation programme is expected to require annual investment running into hundreds of millions of dollars.

"As part of the transition, we are urging independent handset suppliers to stop selling new devices limited to 2G and 3G only, and instead focus on 4G and 5G-compatible models," he said.

He added that the company was also intensifying efforts to identify so-called grey handsets – devices marketed as smartphones but which do not meet the advertised technical specifications and often create connectivity problems for users.

Econet has developed a system to detect such devices when they attempt to connect to its network. Customers will be alerted when affected handsets are identified, while relevant authorities will also be notified to help curb the practice.

Econet’s planned retirement of 3G is part of a global transition towards newer mobile technologies, with operators increasingly repurposing spectrum and network resources for faster and more advanced 4G and 5G services while seeking to minimise disruption to customers.

In Africa, Rwanda has set June 30, 2027, as the date for its nationwide 3G switch-off, while South Africa has established a December 31, 2027, deadline for the transition.

Several European countries moved earlier. Germany and the Czech Republic completed their 3G shutdowns in 2021, while the United Kingdom phased out the technology by early 2025 and is preparing to retire 2G between 2029 and 2033.

Only this week, Ukrainian telecommunications operator Kyivstar announced that it had completed the migration of more than one million subscribers from 3G to 4G, freeing additional spectrum capacity for the expansion of its 4G network.

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