July 14, 2011

CKLN & LIME SIGN MULTI-MILLION DOLLAR CONTRACT
FOR DEDICATED REGIONAL CONNECTIVITY

A major step towards the transformation and strengthening of the region’s tertiary institutions was taken on July 14, 2011 when negotiations between the Caribbean Knowledge and Learning Network, CKLN, and one of the region’s largest telecommunications providers, LIME, culminated in the signing of a US$6.3M contract in Grenada. The region’s first dedicated knowledge, learning and research network, C@ribNET, is a broadband fiber optic network, configured to connect tertiary institutions, hospitals, schools, government agencies and CARICOM institutions together, within the Caribbean. C@ribNET will also to connect these institutions to similar institutions in Europe, USA, Latin America, Africa and Asia. The signing took place at the Spice Island Beach Resort in Grand Anse, Grenada, under the auspices of the Hon. Tillman Thomas, Prime Minister of Grenada.

CKLN, an inter-governmental Agency of the Caribbean Community, CARICOM, secured the funds from the European Union to lease the fibre from LIME, in compliance with CARICOM’s mandate to assist Caribbean member states enhance their global competitiveness by upgrading and diversifying the skills and knowledge of human resources through greater regional collaboration and connectivity.

The contract obligates LIME for a two-year period to provide high-end, upgradeable connectivity that will become the network of choice for education and research collaboration within the Caribbean. LIME agrees to provide top quality service to the region, putting the regional network on an equal footing with other networks in the international arena.

LIME will also conduct and facilitate training of technical staff at the respective country network operation centres. The CKLN will be responsible for the administration, control, monitoring and operations of the network as well as facilitating the sustainability of the network after the initial 2-year period.

LIME was selected as the provider of connectivity for C@ribNET in late 2010 after CKLN conducted an open, transparent procurement process that invited offers from around the World. LIME has established coverage in most of the CARICOM member states, and also demonstrated the ability to provide affordable services in these locations.

Why Connectivity Matters
There are about 150 tertiary institutions in the English-speaking Caribbean, including universities, technical, teaching, vocational and other colleges. The region has excess and growing demand for tertiary level education that the sector cannot accommodate, in terms of professional staff, courses and physical space and equipment. “A dedicated regional network like C@ribNET enables our tertiary and other public institutions to collaborate and share knowledge, develop courses and programmes and ultimately allow access to learning for the thousands of qualified students that otherwise have no access to advanced education,” says Ken Sylvester, Chief Executive Officer of CKLN.

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He reminds that Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) in July 2002, noted that Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) have real potential to enhance and integrate Caribbean societies in areas such as education, health, poverty reduction, delivery of public services and commerce. The potential to utilize technology to overcome many of the constraints inherent in the Caribbean and other small states is both compelling and challenging.

E-learning has long been identified as an answer to the supply challenges facing tertiary institutions and connectivity is a basic requirement for online education. The current cost of connectivity in the Caribbean region has been a prohibiting factor in terms of e-learning initiatives and the development of tertiary level institutions ICT capacity.

An Enabling Environment
One of the most challenging aspects of the enabling environment concerns the telecommunications sector. The Caribbean has slipped behind other countries in the Hemisphere with regard to roll-out of ICTs and has, to date, not realised as many of the tangible benefits seen elsewhere, notably in distance education. Mr. Sylvester noted, however, that while the connectivity being provided by LIME was itself “the wiring,” it is a critical start in creating an enabling environment for ICT in the region.

He went on to say that the usefulness of the network relies on the functional cooperation among institutions and the programmes, courses and applications they develop and make available to users. “With a dedicated network in place, it is now up to the institutions and the public and private sector in each territory to foster the types of cooperation, the types of courses and programmes that Caribbean students can access in order to hone the skills and competencies necessary to strengthen regional economies.” He emphasised that “This is not about CKLN, it is not about CARICOM or LIME, but it is about the knowledge, learning and development institutions and communities of interest in the region taking advantage of this enabling environment.”

The Infrastructure
The network will comprise two tiers - a designated “backbone level” and “access level”. The base or “backbone” of the fibre optic network will be assembled in a “ring” between Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic and with Miami, USA. These locations were selected based on their capability to provide readily affordable co-location services for the network and other equipment required for C@ribNET. This backbone will be high capacity with a bandwidth of 622 Mb. Some backbone nodes will receive the connections to the international research and education communities - Internet2 Network (U.S.A.), GÉANT (Europe) and redCLARA (Latin America).

The European Union funds were managed by the World Bank, and the final contract between CKLN and LIME was rigourously negotiated and closely scrutinized to ensure that the technical, legal and international standards were met but also reflected the peculiarities of the region’s geography and regulatory policies. The EU has been the central financier in the start-up of all the other networks around the world, from Asia, South America, Europe and Africa. Approximately 70% of the investment from the EU is designated for connectivity with the remaining 30% allocated for training.

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