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Damaged Cable Cuts Voice, Data Service to India, Pakistan



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Mark Lewitt, an American manager at the Godrej Upstream call center in Mumbai, India, said today that the better-funded Indian call centers had switched over to satellite backup systems, where available, but that not all centers had invested in such connections.

Damage to the undersea telecommunications cable [SEA-ME-WE3](#) (SMW3) Monday initially disrupted most of Pakistan's international telephone and Internet connections, but the outage spread to India, the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Djibouti as repairs were started yesterday.

Call centers in India using connections through the Reliance Group, India's largest corporate conglomerate, to SMW3 to reach customers in the U.S. were experiencing service outages for the past day, they reported to [InternationalStaff.net](#), a company that specializes in offshore process migration, call center program management, turnkey software development and help desk management.

Satellite Backup Systems

Mark Lewitt, an American manager at the Godrej Upstream call center in Mumbai, India, said today that the better-funded Indian call centers were using satellite backup systems, where available, but that not all centers relying on Reliance had invested in satellite connections.

Established Indian call centers scrambled to obtain backup capacity after a [fire last September](#) at a switching facility in that country disrupted last-mile service to most Indian call centers.

The SMW3 fiber optic cable was reportedly damaged on the floor of the Arabian Sea 21 miles south of the port city of Karachi, Pakistan. A service vessel belonging to E-Marine, a UAE company, was dispatched from the United Arab Emirates to undertake repairs.

There have been conflicting reports on the expected duration of the service disruptions caused by the damaged cable. The Press Trust of India, Reuters and Xinhua have all reported that disruptions are anticipated to last for two weeks.

Babar Jhumra, who manages the [NBA Computers](#) call center in Karachi, Pakistan, said that call

center operators in Pakistan have been told that service levels on SMW3 could be restored as early as the end of the day today. Officials for the Internet Service Provider Association of Pakistan (ISPAK) have said that repairs might not be completed until Friday.

Government Backup Help

SMW3 provides Pakistan with its sole high speed cable access. All call centers in Pakistan serving international customers have been without their usual level of telecommunications service since Monday.

The government of Pakistan has provided satellite backup systems to international call centers in that country at no charge to those centers, in order to make them more internationally competitive, and nine international call centers in Pakistan are reportedly operating on satellite backup connections now.

Satellite backup services have kept the call center industry in Pakistan functioning, albeit with degraded line quality. Satellite backup systems have not been provided to other types of businesses in Pakistan or to general consumers, leading to widespread voice and data transmission disruptions for those telecommunications customers.

Banks and other financial institutions in Pakistan have reported widespread operational problems due to a lack of voice and data connections.

IT firms that did not qualify as pure call center operations and have not been allowed independent access to satellite backup capacity in Pakistan have reportedly been particularly hard hit.

Some Operations Moved Out of Country

Three satellite connections are reportedly providing Pakistan with a total of 102 MB in international bandwidth now, which is enough to support about 1,500 voice lines using conventional technology. Officials at ISPAK said that Pakistan's normal bandwidth consumption is 465 MB.

ISPAK reports indicate that some consumers in Pakistan were able to send and receive e-mails but not browse the Web. According to ISPAK, there are over 50 ISPs in that country, serving more than 10 million Internet users.

"We have shifted some of our operations offshore [outside of Pakistan] to maintain the integrity of end-user systems," said Ayub Khan at business automation firm [InfiniLogic](#), adding, "but most companies do not have that option." He expressed concern today about how long service disruptions would continue and said that some small IT startups in Pakistan will not be able to weather an extended service outage.


The view from NBA Computers' Jhumra was more upbeat. He said that when service disruptions initially occurred on Monday, his center lost Internet connections for only a few minutes, but their voice connection has been on satellite backup systems since then. Jhumra said that NBA Computers is still receiving some data through the damaged undersea cable.

Questionable Quality

As a pure call center operation, NBA has been receiving satellite backup service continuously and at no cost since service on SMW3 was initially disrupted. However, satellite service has latency issues.

In tests conducted for InternationalStaff.net late yesterday, NBA Computers reported a latency rate of 450-550 milliseconds between Pakistan and the U.S. using satellite backup lines. Latency rates above 500 milliseconds are considered below commercial quality, at least for extended use. Indian call centers tested by InternationalStaff.net have also been within the 450-550 milliseconds latency range when using satellite uplinks.

Jhumra said that work is underway to provide a separate telecommunications link for Pakistan, with a target launch date of October.

The lack of a redundant communications link is the most significant of [Pakistan's IT challenges](#). There are also plans underway to build a high speed telecommunications link between Pakistan and India, which would provide additional redundancy to both countries. 

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