

World-class connections

INTERVIEW WITH ISMAIL WAHEED

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, DHIRAAGU



ISMAIL WAHEED

began his career at Cable & Wireless Maldives in 1977. Later, with the formation of Dhiraagu Pvt Ltd, a JVC between the Government of Maldives and Cable & Wireless in 1988, he continued his tenure with Dhiraagu until the present day. Prior to his current position as Managing Director and CEO of Dhiraagu, he has held several key leadership positions including Head of Networks, Head of Marketing and Customer Services. He holds a BEng (Hons) in Telecommunications Systems Management & Design from Anglia Polytechnic University.

Please provide an historic overview of Dhiraagu and comment on the company's experience in the Maldives.

Dhiraagu was formed in 1988 as the country's first national telecommunication service provider. The company was established as a joint venture with the Government of Maldives in partnership with (then) Cable & Wireless, UK and currently with Batelco Group, Bahrain.

After its formation, the company's initial focus was to extend the country's fledgling telephony services away from Male' (and the nearby islands) to the rest of the country. This was not an easy task, considering the available technologies and logistical challenges we had at the time. The Maldives is a promising yet also a difficult and unique terrain to operate in, given the small island nation's geography and topography. Nevertheless, we built a microwave backbone network across the country spanning nearly 850km and successfully rolled out telephony services to all the populated islands by the end of 1999. Concurrently we also started rolling out mobile and internet services in the country during the 90s.

All the while, we relied on satellite-based services for our international connectivity. Therefore, during 2006 we built the country's first international submarine cable to Sri Lanka, connecting Maldives to the major cable systems of the world, providing faster and more reliable quality of service to our customers.

Dhiraagu is good example of a longstanding, successful foreign partnership with the government of Maldives, and we have always been a major contributor to the development of the country and its economy. With over 25 years' experience in Maldives, Dhiraagu continues to be the leading and the largest telecommunications operator of the country.

What makes Dhiraagu stand out from the in the markets you cover?

We believe we are the trusted brand for both consumer and business markets and we deliver total communication solutions across the country. We continue to be the market leader, due to our commitment and focus on providing quality, reliability and value for money services to our customers.

Our services are available in all the inhabited islands, tourist resorts and industrial islands that are scattered across the archipelago, reaching even the most remote islands. We have established operations centres in nine

locations across the country, with dedicated teams located closer to our customers, ensuring a high level of personalised, round the clock service.

Recently, we made a strategic investment in the country, by building the first and only national fibre-optic submarine cable network along the length of the country, connected through six landing points. This investment gives us the capability to deliver seamless high-bandwidth services and next generation telecom and data services to all our customers across the country.

Please provide an outline of Dhiraagu's current operations and future plans?

We are currently progressing with an ambitious project to provide broadband services to all inhabited islands in the Maldives, irrespective of population and size. We will be using a multiple of 3G, LTE and ADSL technologies depending on the location. To-date we have covered 96 per cent of population with broadband data services.

Our future plans concern the rapid convergence of technologies and services that are taking place in the markets around the world, particularly with the convergence of information flow from traditional means to smarter and mobile applications.

What is the role of Corporate Social Responsibility at Dhiraagu?

Corporate Social Responsibility is a top priority for the company. We are a signatory to the United Nations Global Compact (UNGC) and we are committed to undertake sustainable business practices that positively make a difference to our people, our community and our environment.

CSR for Dhiraagu is more than philanthropy. We engage in strategic operations that create sustained long term benefits to the community. For instance, Dhiraagu Apprenticeship Programme is an educational and training programme for Maldivian youth which has been successfully running for six consecutive years. This structured programme is designed to improve the employability of youth by enhancing their work-skills and knowledge needed for different work disciplines covering IT, Engineering, Sales, Marketing, Customer Service and General Management. Graduates from our programme have been employed in Dhiraagu and in other organisations in the country. Environmental sustainability is also a main pillar of our CSR programme.

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the independence of the Maldives, please outline the progress the country has made.

The country has made significant progress in key sectors, including the tourism and telecommunications industry. If we focus on the telecommunications sector, the country's infrastructure and services have rapidly expanded over the past 20 years. For example, providing 100 per cent coverage to all inhabited islands, resorts, hotels and industrial islands, the roll-out of mobile broadband to over 96 per cent of the population, expansion of 4G LTE to over 50 per cent of the population, the country's fastest fibre broadband internet, the introduction of telemedicine solutions etc are among our important milestones. The progress in telecommunication services significantly contributes and will continue to do so, in meeting key developmental goals in supporting education, health care and establishing good governance. Our plans are aligned with the government's development vision for the country.

What advice would you give to potential investors?

For over 25 years, we have been successfully operating as a joint venture with the Government of Maldives in a longstanding foreign partnership. Similarly, I believe, that many of the world-renowned hospitality brands who have invested in Maldives will attest the same.

The government is supportive to such investments and plays a key role in creating a climate that is conducive to foreign investment and business. The country's strategic location in the Indian ocean, together with the availability of an educated and dynamic workforce are further inducements.

The Maldives is one of the most unique destinations in the world. The country is popular for its crystal clear lagoons, shimmering white beaches and moreover, for the tranquillity in our remote islands. As the leading telecom service provider, we assure an added sense of comfort in providing seamless connectivity to any of these locations and to the rest of the world. This provides a peace of mind whenever you visit our remote islands as a tourist or as a potential investor.

Dhiraagu is a good example of a longstanding successful foreign partnership with the government of the Maldives

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