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Autor: Fankhauser, W.
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The "Voice of Switzerland" from French Guiana

Since July 1994, Swiss Radio International (SRI) has been using a powerful relay station for its intercontinental shortwave programmes located 7000 km from Switzerland, in Montsinéry, French Guiana. The infrastructure used by SRI is part of a unit with 4 powerful transmitters and a dozen antennas. SRI programmes are broadcast via a rotary antenna to South, Central and North America as well as to Africa and Australia.

1988 saw the start of talks between Swiss Telecom PTT and Télédiffusion de France TDF, which is responsible for building and operating transmitters in France. TDF had already begun building transmitters for Radio France Internationale RFI in Montsinéry a few years earlier. To date, four 500 kW transmitters and 12 antennas have been erected for broadcasting to Latin America and Africa. Swiss Telecom PTT, for its part, considered using a transmitter mainly as a substitute for its South American relay station in Gabon as well as a way of improving its service to Central and North America.

In 1991, TDF and Swiss Telecom PTT signed a contract regulating the construction of an antenna specially for SRI and the latter's use of a high-powered transmitter for ten and a half hours a day.

The Montsinéry transmitting centre stands near the small town of the same name, roughly 50 kilometres from the capital Cayenne, on flat ground, just a few metres above sea-level. SRI has the

smaller of the two rotating antennas and a 500 kW transmitter at its disposal. The antenna can be rotated round a central axis in any direction in just under three minutes, and this manoeuvrability makes for continuous, flexible use of the transmission time allocated.

The Montsinéry relay station's performance has been systematically monitored since its commissioning in July 1994. A total of 1000 listeners and a series of professional monitors in the relay station's target areas compared the reception quality of Montsinéry broadcasts with those of Swiss transmitters and other relay stations. They noted a marked improvement in reception conditions, particularly throughout the Americas. Now reception of SRI programmes is also good in areas (such as Canada) where listeners had been complaining for years about unsatisfactory conditions.

Why abroad?

In the mid-eighties, the Swiss government instructed

Telecom PTT to temporarily bridge Switzerland's lack of transmitter capacity by using foreign installations. In consequence, Telecom PTT and SRI joined forces to seek foreign partners with shortwave transmitters ideally located for SRI's priority broadcasting areas. Contracts were soon signed with the commercial radio station Africa No 1 in Gabon, West Africa (for transmissions to South America and South Africa), with Radio Beijing (for the Far East and South-east Asia) and with Brazil's national programme Radiobras (for Central and part of North America).

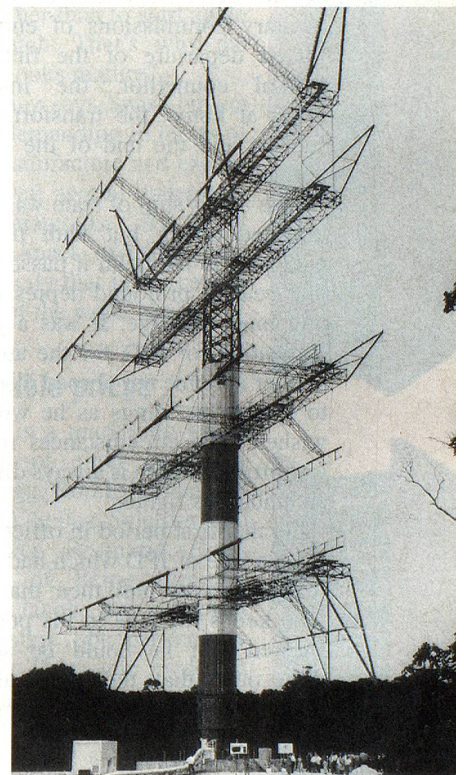
Use of these transmitters is compensated for by Telecom PTT, which is responsible for SRI's shortwave transmitters, on the basis of rental contracts (Africa No 1 and Radiobras) or in the form of transmission time on Swiss antennas (Radio Beijing). Once the Montsinéry relay had gone into operation, Telecom PTT cancelled its contracts with Africa No 1 and Radiobras. There is, however, a possibility that new relays serving listeners in Asia will be contracted.

Swiss transmitters

No country in the world relies solely on foreign installations for its shortwave broadcasts. SRI too bases its service concept on the assumption that it will continue to have transmitters in Switzerland because these guarantee a vital measure of independence whenever technical or political reasons require it. Although SRI is already using four satellite channels for programme broadcasting, it will continue to rely on high-performance shortwave transmitters for at least another 15 years, as they are the only means of ensuring fast, direct radio programme dissemination worldwide and

mobile reception. In Europe, where direct satellite reception is well established, SRI has already cut back on its use of shortwave but continues to make sure its programmes can be received at peak listening times on some shortwave frequencies.

Outside Europe, shortwave is still the main means of diffusion, and in these areas, SRI is doing its best to improve shortwave services where necessary, either by redesigning transmitter facil-



The SRI Relay at Montsinéry. (Photo: SRI)

ities in Switzerland or by using other relay stations which are well placed for priority target areas. All major and medium-sized international radio stations have realised that a good shortwave service is the best way to maintain and build up an audience for subsequent direct and mobile satellite reception.

**W. Fankhauser
Communications & Marketing Service** ■

JOHN F. KENNEDY INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL

3792 Saanen/Gstaad, Switzerland

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W. Lovell, Director,
3792 Saanen, Switzerland
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