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Libya Emerges From Its Tech Time Warp

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Isolated for years by a United Nations embargo, the North African nation Libya in many ways is only now entering the 21st century.

From 1992 through 2003, it couldn't buy high-tech gear under sanctions imposed for the country's suspected role in terrorism — including the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, that killed 270 people.

The lifting of sanctions has created an unusual opportunity for privately held Certiport, a Salt Lake City training firm working to get Libya up to speed as it emerges from its tech time warp.

"There were absolutely no computers," said Abdelmouniam Makhtari, Certiport's manager for Middle East and Africa business development, speaking from Libya's capital, Tripoli. The firm has been providing tech training and certification to the Libyan government since 2005.

Situated between Egypt and Tunisia on the Mediterranean coast, the country of 5.9 million missed out on things most of the world now takes for granted: faster chips, the Internet — even Windows 95.

Libya wants to computerize all government offices. The first step in that process is moving its national security forces and police from paper to computers.

When those offices are computerized, the country will begin work on other branches of its bureaucracy, Makhtari says.

So far the company has trained 1,000 police staffers in basic computer skills, including Microsoft applications and Internet use.

Libya isn't alone in the modernization push.

Saudi Arabia, with 27 million people, has certified a wide range of computer users, including students, private sector employees and government workers.

"The country is moving towards e-government, and they want to make sure that their employees have a benchmark in digital literacy," said Rumaih al-Rumaih, vice president for education and development for Al-Khaleej Training and Education. The company, a Certiport distributor based in Riyadh, provides materials and certification exams in Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Kuwait.

About 20,000 Saudis took exams in 2006, twice the number that did so the previous year. While most Saudis under 30 are computer-literate, many older people aren't, al-Rumaih says.

"The government sector still is a bit slow," he said, citing the country's military forces as an example. But the country is working to catch up, he adds.

Certiport sometimes has to walk a fine line when it comes to cultural issues in Middle Eastern countries, says the company's CEO, David Saedi.

Case in point: One of the company's promotional posters for a student computer competition shows a boy and girl working together — a cultural taboo in much of the gender-segregated Middle East.

"That won't run in Arabic countries," Saedi said.

Instead, the company came up with separate posters for each gender to use in Arab countries it does business with. Testing centers have to set up separate days for females and males to take certification tests.

It can be challenging, Saedi says. But the potential upside makes it worth the trouble, he adds.

"This is just the tip of the iceberg," he said. "The Middle East is poised to become an e-power, according to the wishes of the local governments."

Jordan and Saudi Arabia are doing the most to bring their countries into the digital age, he says.

But while Middle Eastern governments are encouraging their citizens to learn tech skills, that modernization goes only so far — especially when it comes to giving free access to online information.

Digital literacy is a double-edge sword, says Michael Izady, a history professor at Pace University in New York. Exposure to new ideas can foster economic growth, but it can also compromise a regime's political agenda, he says.

"When you open people's eyes, you can't control what they see," said Izady, who does cultural training for U.S. military special forces headed to the Middle East.

That doesn't stop governments from trying.

In Libya's case, computers are usually allowed only in places that can be controlled and observed, such as university campuses, government buildings and libraries.

The biggest Internet-related worry for the Libyan and Saudi Arabian governments is citizen access to political information, Izady says.

Governments have a variety of methods at their disposal to limit this: Along with monitoring use in public places, they can keep the price of computers high, and install filters and firewalls to block opposing ideas.

It's no surprise that their efforts never completely succeed, though. Tech-savvy younger people always find ways around them, Izady says.

"It is the one thing they cannot escape," he said.