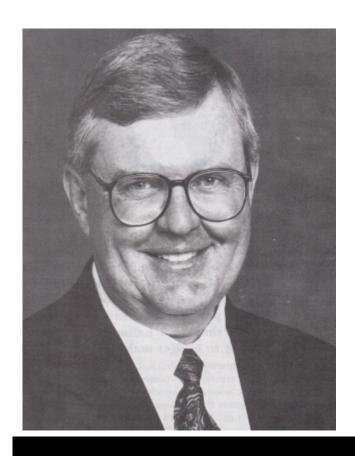# THE LANKA BELL CONNECTION

Lanka Bell, a subsidiary of Singapore-based Transasia Telecom Ltd., is all set to provide a parallel but a more speedy and economical telephone service to Sri Lanka from early next year. **Roshan Dane** reports on what's different about Lanka Bell.

The waiting period for a telephone line is one of the biggest woes that almost all Sri Lankan telephone subscribers have gone through. In this modern age of information revolution, if one has to wait for years to get a telephone connection, which is considered a vital necessity these days, it is needless to say that Sri Lanka cannot prosper economically.

Perhaps bearing this in mind, the Government of Sri Lanka decided to liberalize the telecommunication service, hitherto monopolized by the Sri Lanka Telecom. Two companies were given licences on a competitive bidding basis to operate islandwide services on a wireless system.

Lanka Bell, a subsidiary of Singapore-based Transasia Telecom Ltd., is one of the companies authorized to operate telephone services parallel to the service offered

by Sri Lanka Telecom.

The Executive Director of Lanka Bell, *Donald Hill*, says his company is making initial preparations to launch their services early next year.

Hill is quite confident that when the initial backlog for phone connections is cleared and when the company is fully operative they will be able to give a telephone connection to a new applicant within a short period of five days. This indeed is creditable in a market where a waiting period of even five years was not unusual, not so long ago.

Hill says that his company will be operating on a 'wireless local loop' based on 'The Ionica Fixed Radio Access System' which is also known as 'Proximity I'. This system offers a cost-effective and flexible alternative to traditional wire-based access networks. It provides a wireless radio link to the public telecommunications network and is the economic solution for a range of applications from remote locations to growing urban environments.
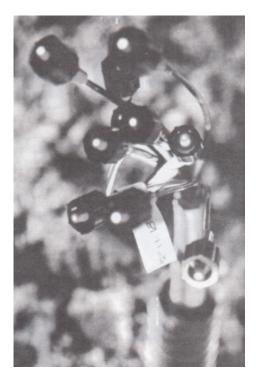
The 'Proximity I' system comprises three main components – the Residential Service System (RSS), the Basestation and the Operations, Administration and Maintenance (OA&M) system.

The Basestation provides the connection between the customers' RSS and the public telecommunications network. This connection is made via the radio to the RSS and by either microwave radio, fibre optic or landline to the local exchange.

The RSS is the customer premise equipment of the system which provides the link from the customer to the basestation. This equipment is compatible with all existing wireless devices namely phone, fax, modems and payphones.

The telephone service provided by Lanka Bell will have several new features not found in the existing network. According to Mr Hill, the system includes the ability to have more than one telephone number on a single line with a different type of 'ring'. "In other countries it is a popular feature to know whether the call is for you or for your kid", he said.

A tripartite conferencing facility which allows a subscriber to conference with two other parties simultaneously, the ability to transfer a call to another phone on the same system, the facility to put one call on hold and answer a waiting call and a

voice mail system which can substitute the answering machine are some of the novel features available to the subscribers of Lanka Bell.

Hill says that once the network is launched, initially it would cover a radius of about 15 to 20 kilometres from Colombo. "We expect to be much less expensive than the Cellular networks and also to be competitive with Sri Lanka Telecom", he said. During 1997, the company expects to fulfill all the demands it gets for phone connections.

According to Hill, Sri Lanka would be the only country in Asia to have a wireless system of telephones. Proximity l' system is common in countries like UK, Finland, Columbia and Australia.

Lanka Bell is supported by a strategic technology partner, Nortel, a subsidiary of Bell Canada, which is one of the world's largest manufacturers of telecommunications equipment, and a strategic operating partner of General Telephone and Electronic (GTE), which operates more than 24 million telephone lines worldwide.

Lanka Bell is currently capitalized at US$15 million and is committed to increase capitalization to US$25 million. With the increase, Nortel will become a 20 percent shareholder in Lanka Bell. There are plans to bring total capitalization to at least US8132 million by mid-1997 to support Lanka Bell's aggressive telephone network implementation plans.

Lanka Bell is locally managed by Donald Hill, Executive Director. Prior to Lanka Bell, Hill was with AT&T, the world's largest telecommunications company, where he performed in a variety of operations, marketing and strategic planning roles. The Managing Director of Lanka Bell is Steven K Baker. Based in Singapore, Baker is also the Managing Director of Transmarco Ltd. Lanka Bell is also supported locally by Shanker Somasunderam, Director. The other Directors include Siva Bremakumar, a Chartered Accountant and Director of Sure International, Ron Maness, General Manager of Transasia Telecom Ltd., and Lee Howe Young, Chairman of Transmarco Ltd.