

pany owns the rights to many popular songs, and mobile operators pay for those,” the official said. He added that, apart from a fixed amount paid by the mobile operator, Alam El-Phan also shares the revenue from each download.

Mobile companies, such as Vodafone and MobiNil, also offer their clients more sophisticated content, such as video messages of popular song clips or

football goals and Java games. This kind of business, according to a recent study conducted by multinational mobile-phone manufacturer Nokia, is on the rise in Europe, North America and Asia. In Egypt, though, the model is hindered by the “slow GPRC service and the rarity of handsets that support such services,” Tydeman said, adding, “Operators have a lot to answer for that many multi-

media handsets aren’t configured to receive such content.”

Both Vodafone and MobiNil have also introduced information services such as SMS news alerts, new headlines and real-time coverage of key football matches.

Repeated attempts to reach officials from both companies, though, were unsuccessful.

ALAA SHAHINE



STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

TYCOON, ENVIRONMENTALISTS PROTEST PROPOSED ISLAND SALE

A beautiful island in the Red Sea, an Italian real estate investment firm with \$2 billion to burn, a cash-strapped government looking for a quick cash infusion and a large and vocal opposition: these were the ingredients for a show-down over plans to replicate the Italian resort island of Sardinia – on the Red Sea’s Giftun Island.

It began in April, when it was reported that the government was on the verge of concluding a \$2 billion deal, payable over

10 years, with Italian real estate investment firm Ernesto Preatoni Immobiliare (EPI) for the sale of the island.

Giftun, however, is a protected area, on which no development or construction activities (with the exception of environment-friendly “eco-lodges”) are allowed. Needless to say, the government misstep raised a stink. “The government’s credibility is on the line,” said Mahmoud El Kaissouni, chairman of the eco-tourism committee at the Egyptian Federation of Tourist Chambers. “This casts suspicions

that the government is conveniently using protected areas as a guise under which it can retain control over certain areas until it gets a good price for it.”

A biodiverse habitat, sheltering numerous species of migratory birds and marine life, including the endangered green turtle, Giftun’s “protected” status is well deserved. The second largest island in the Red Sea, Giftun boasts 24 kilometers of coastline. “Two kilometers longer than the coastline of Hurghada,” noted Amr Ali, managing director of the Hurghada ▶

PHOTO: COURTESY KEVIN G. HAIGH



Environmental Protection & Conservation Association.

Additionally, Gifun is surrounded by 14 prime diving locations, representing 40 percent of the total number of Hurghada-based dive sites. “Around 60 percent of all visitors to Hurghada head to the island at some point during their trip,” said Ali.

Most in the industry maintain that the development of a massive tourist resort on Gifun would have dire effects on the area’s ecosystem. “Coral reefs are the heart of the Red Sea, they are the life support of a rich bio-marine life, and their loss would be an utter catastrophe,” said Ali. “Reefs already have to cope with 240,000 dives a year, 13 times what they can handle,” he added.

“A protected area should be sacrosanct,” agreed El-Kaissouni. “These areas are designated as natural preserves because of their unique environments, which should be respected, not tampered with and endangered.” Currently, there are 24 protected areas in Egypt, a number expected to reach 40 by 2008. “This is international heritage entrusted to our care,” El-Kaissouni asserted.

Many observers also fear that the creation of an elaborate resort on Gifun would take customers from existing hotels. “Hurghada has a total room capacity of 42,000,” noted Ali. “This project would have added 10,000 rooms to current capacity, a 23-percent increase – not much help to prices.” What’s more, he added, “We sell nature – take that away by draining our natural resources, and you’ve

killed our marketing edge.”

Prominent Egyptian businessman Samih Sawiris, for his part, questioned the process by which the proposed deal was conducted. In a recent edition of state daily *Al-Ahram*, Sawiris posited that, even if the idea of selling Gifun was viable, the deal should have been properly conducted through an international tender.

EPI owner Ernesto Pretoni, meanwhile, is hardly a newcomer to the

Egyptian tourism development scene, boasting several previous investments, including the El-Sheikh Coast Resort in Sharm Al Sheikh and other properties. In April, EPI issued a statement via the Italian embassy noting that, “The real reason behind the criticism launched against the project is not clear,” and that, “environmental concerns were being used as a cover for other economic interests in conflict with the project” – a possible reference to the El-Gouna Resort, outside Hurghada, owned by Sawiris.

But opposition to the sale – including the support of Red Sea governor general Saad Abou Rida – was insurmountable. One feature of the resistance arrayed against the deal was its international character. A “Save Gifun” campaign attracted the attention of environmental, tourism and diving communities worldwide, all of which sided with their local counterparts against the sale.

On April 28, therefore, President Hosni Mubarak issued a directive halting the Gifun project, to the joy of local hoteliers, environmentalists and the wider coral community.

NAZLY SHAMEL

OF ADS AND EDITORIAL

PARTY PAPERS NOTE ADVERTISERS’ FEAR OF POLITICAL CONTENT

At a February conference held by the journalists syndicate, members called on governmental organizations to allocate their budgets on the basis of commercial, rather than political factors.

Many journalists believe the government employs a carrot-and-stick approach to the advertising budgets of state organizations – particularly with respect to political party mouthpieces. However, the extent to which such a shift would invigorate party publications may be overstated, owing to their low circulation rates com-

pared to the state-owned dailies. “Sometimes, the government punishes political party newspapers when a newspaper criticizes its policies,” said Salib Boutros, deputy chairman of opposition daily *Al-Wafd*, published by the political party of the same name. “One former minister, while in office, refused to publish any ads in *Al-Wafd* because the paper had criticized his ministry.”

The solution? “We want the unbiased distribution of governmental ads to be determined by commercial factors, such as newspapers’ circulation and readership.” ▶

PHOTO: BRUNO – RED SEA IMAGES