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Balloons to bring internet to remote areas in Brazil

The Brazilian government is planning to start a project using balloons to take internet access to remote areas of the country — and that has nothing to do with the Google Loon project.

Google representatives have met Brazilian government officials last week to talk about potential partnerships, but the initiative led by the public telecoms company Telebrás and the National Institute for Space Research (INPE) has been signed off by the federal government back in May and the first tests are scheduled to begin next month.

The government has preferred off-the-shelf equipment for the trials and a prototype made by Altave, a startup from the São Paulo countryside city of São José dos Campos has been chosen for the upcoming trials. The idea is to customize existing options and test their performance to enable the development of a final version of the internet balloon.

Telebrás president Caio Bonilha told Brazilian newspaper O Estado de São Paulo that the government will prefer to work with national suppliers and import as little electronic equipment as possible — but added that the competitive process for the project will be open to local and foreign parties to ensure that the best option is chosen.

Connecting rural areas with the balloons is a model the government is very keen to develop. Senior representatives of the Ministry of Communications have been quoted as saying that the cost of that option is much lower than that of a transmission tower, with the added bonuses of ease of deployment and greater reach.

Next month's tests will be carried out at an INPE base in the São Paulo countryside, with the Altave balloon attached to the ground and also attached to a moving vehicle, which will then send the internet signal to the local city hall and a school.

The following steps after the test phase will be to define the companies that will take part in the project, develop a more advanced prototype next year and create a final product in 2015.

Last week, Google's vice-president of corporate innovation Mohamman Gawdat met the Brazilian communications minister Paulo Bernardo to talk about ways in which the government could adopt some of the company's products such as Glass and Loon.

Bernardo pointed out that the government project and Google Loon are different initiatives, but said that he asked the internet giant to produce equipment that could be tested early next year and has picked senior officials in the Ministry of Telecommunications and Telebrás to work on the potential partnership.

The news of the government-led, internet-giving balloon project follows a string of other technology initiatives led by the public sector in Brazil, such as creating its own safe email service, offering cloud services and building the country's own satellite.