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BBC Plans New Services for North Korea and Russia

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Tony Hall, the Director General of the BBC makes a speech at the Science Museum in London, Sept. 7.

The BBC plans to launch short-wave radio broadcasts to North Korea for the first time and start new TV or digital services in Russia to address "democratic deficits," the world's biggest public service broadcaster said Monday.

It also proposed a new radio news service for Ethiopia and Eritrea.

As part of its proposals for the next decade, the British broadcaster, which is under mounting political pressure to justify its size in a digital age, and facing severe cuts to its budget, said it planned significant investment in its World Service operation.

"This is a service we want to strengthen and expand," said Tony Hall, the BBC's director general.

"My own strong view is that this is one area where this country's voice could be much stronger — especially in the Middle East, India and Russia and the states that used to make up

the Soviet Union."

The broadcaster, which wants to reach 500 million people globally through its news operation, said it would beam the World Service, which has had its funding reduced since 2010, to areas "where there is a democratic deficit in impartial news."

As part of these plans, the BBC would aim to expand its digital presence in Russia, either via YouTube or its Russian equivalent RuTube, and would look at the feasibility of a Russian satellite TV channel.

It also plans a daily news service for North Korea, whose citizens are largely cut off from news of the world outside, having no access to the Internet and being unable to make calls outside their country.

Currently the U.S.-funded Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Asia (RFA) both make short-wave broadcasts in Korean to the communist state, where those who listen to unauthorized foreign broadcasts can face severe punishment.

But unlike South Korea and the United States, Britain is not seen by Pyongyang as an enemy state, and the BBC plans might not evoke as harsh a reaction.

The 93-year-old BBC is facing the prospect of one of its biggest overhauls on the back of criticism from some ministers and rivals that it stifles commercial competition and fails to provide balanced political coverage.

In July, the government said it would look at whether the BBC should be cut back and whether its current funding structure, with its major source of income coming from households paying a £145.50 ($222) license fee, needed reform.

Hall said some services would "inevitably" be shut and that the BBC would allow rivals access to some of its material and platforms.

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