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How to set the time zone and keep the clock correct on a Linux VPS

Administration & Fixes

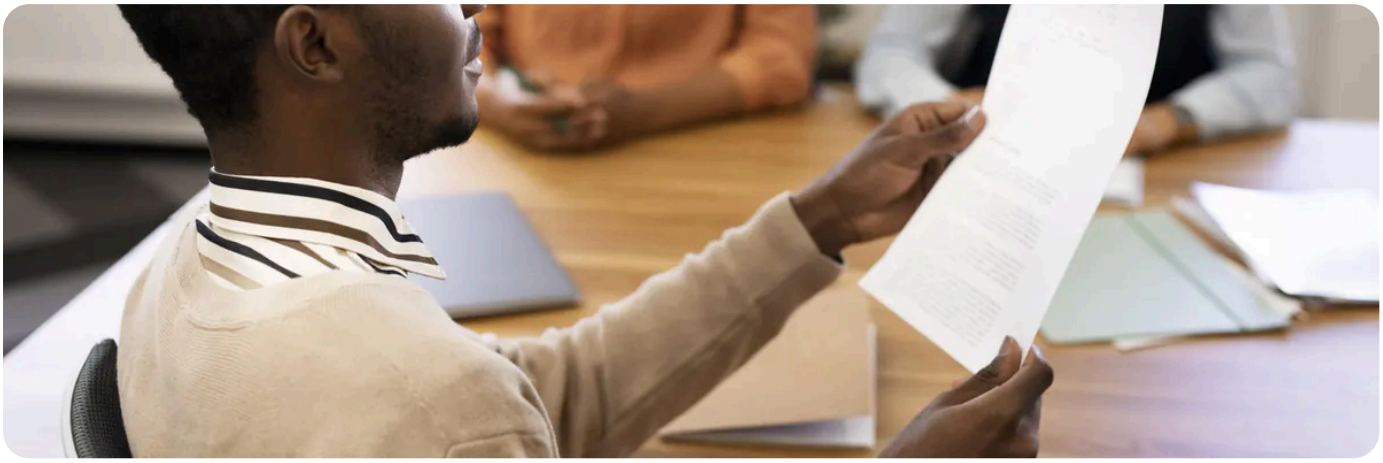
CODE	VERSION	COUNTRY · LANGUAGE
RLX-MZ-KB-1364	v2026.10.10	Mozambique · English

Interweb Mozambique
RLX Holdings, S.A. · Group RLX Holdings
Tax ID (NUIT) 401 191 607 · Legal entity no. (NUEL) 105 045 974 · Economic activity code (CAE) 62022

https://www.meu.interweb.co.mz/knowledgebase/1364

How to set the time zone and keep the clock correct on a Linux VPS

Administration & Fixes Created on **October 10, 2026** 3 min read



On Linux, the command in charge is `timedatectl`. Run it with nothing after it and you see three things: the local time, the **time zone** in use and whether the clock is **synchronised** with the network. A wrong clock looks harmless and is not: it breaks certificates ("not valid yet"), misaligns logs, and makes `cron` jobs run at times you did not expect. The commands are yours, on your own server: support does not run them for you (see **how far our support goes**).

See what is set now

Run `timedatectl`. Look for the lines "Time zone", "System clock synchronized: yes" and the active synchronisation service. A new VPS usually comes in UTC, the universal time, with no offset at all. That is not a fault: it is the most usual choice for servers.

Changing the time zone

1. **List the zones and find yours.** `timedatectl list-timezones | grep -i city`, replacing "city" with the name of your main city in English. The names always have the shape Region/City.

2. **Set it:** `sudo timedatectl set-timezone Region/City`, with the name you found. To go back to universal time: `sudo timedatectl set-timezone UTC`.

3. **Confirm** with `timedatectl` and with `date`.

4. **Restart what depends on the time.** Services that were already running may have kept the old zone. Restart `cron` (on Debian and Ubuntu, `sudo systemctl restart cron`) and your applications, or reboot the server.

Keeping the clock right

1. **Check that synchronisation is on.** In `timedatectl`, the synchronisation line should say “yes”. If not, switch it on with `sudo timedatectl set-ntp true`.

2. **If no synchronisation service is installed.** On Debian and Ubuntu, install `systemd-timesyncd` with `sudo apt install systemd-timesyncd`. On AlmaLinux and Rocky there is usually `chrony` already; check with `chronyc tracking`.

3. **Check again after a minute.** The first synchronisation can take a moment.

Choice	When it makes sense
Server on UTC	The commonest and most predictable. The logs of several servers line up, and conversion to local time is done in the application.
Server on your local time	Handy when it is a single server and whoever runs it reads the logs and cron schedules in their own time. Beware of clock changes, if your country has them.

The server’s zone, PHP’s and the database’s can be three different things.
Changing the system’s does not change what your code or MySQL use on their own. See **what time the server is on, and why PHP and MySQL can disagree**. And scheduled jobs run on the server’s time: see **my cron job does not run on the VPS**.

A certificate that is “not valid yet” is almost always the clock.
If an HTTPS that worked yesterday throws a date error, start with `date`. See also **common VPS and Cloud errors**.

NEED A HAND?

Does the server clock refuse to synchronise? Tell us the system and what timedatectl shows.

Open a support ticket →

SEE ALSO

- Your first session on a new Linux VPS →

What time the server is on, and why PHP and MySQL can disagree

My cron job does not run on the VPS: the usual causes

Where are the logs on a Linux VPS: journalctl and /var/log

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