

Aakash tablet: Future uncertain

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NEW DELHI: Hailed as a game changer for affordable computing devices, the \$35 Aakash tablet now faces an uncertain future. The human resource development ministry has put on hold its plans to tender its biggest order till date for 50 million tablets.

Repeated production delays by vendor Datawind, which won the tender to deliver 100,000 tablets, appear to have convinced the ministry to take a relook at Sibal's dream project of a low-cost tablet for every student.

The ministry's logic is that the need to manufacture these low-cost tablets no longer exists, as many inexpensive tablets are now available. "Even if Aakash fails, others (lowcost tablets from private companies) have cropped up, which is a good thing. We are not worried about the hardware; the utility depends on the student. They can use the content on any device of their choice," human resource development minister MM Pallam Raju said.

A decision on whether to proceed with the Aakash will be taken after considering the reports by two committees assessing the ministry's ICT schemes—the Goverdhan Mehta Committee has submitted its report, and the ministry expects the committee headed by NIIT chairman Rajendra Pawar to submit its report soon.

Raju says students would be better served if the ministry focused its resources on improving the last mile connectivity in universities and colleges that would enable using the tablets. There are those who say that the two exercises of procuring lowcost tablets and ensuring connectivity are not mutually exclusive.

Senior officials explained that ensuring the availability of a low-cost tablet was one of the reasons why the ministry threw its weight behind developing and launching Aakash. Raju maintained that the project helped create an environment for similar other devices in the market for students to take their pick rather than being too "obsessed" with the device.

Raju and HRD officials say they would have been more confident if the ordered 1,00,000 Aakash tablets had been delivered. Datawind is contracted to deliver 100,000 tablets, but it has delivered only about 20% of the order so far.

It has time till March 31 to fulfill its contract. Education secretary Ashok Thakur said the ministry had written to IIT Bombay, which is heading the project, to ensure that Datawind meets the terms and conditions of the supply order by March 31, failing which action could be initiated.