

## New twist in Aakash tablet controversy

**Updated:** Fri, Apr 13 2012. 12 47 AM IST

New Delhi: The controversy over the Indian government's \$45 tablet, Aakash, has taken a fresh twist, with a scrap breaking out between the manufacturer, Canada's DataWind Ltd, and its erstwhile assembly partner, Hyderabad's Quad Electronics Solutions Pvt. Ltd.

Meanwhile, thousands of people who have booked the tablet are bearing the brunt of the fight. Bookings for an upgraded version of Aakash, the UbiSlate 7+, opened late last year, but deliveries are yet to start. Many of those who have booked the tablet have paid an advance.

The fight between the two former partners, who have terminated their relationship and claim to have served legal notices to each other, is the latest chapter in the troubled saga of the government's ambitious effort to bridge the digital divide with a low-cost product. The government was expected to buy 100,000 Aakash tablets, but stopped after the initial lot when serious quality problems surfaced. The number of tablets bought by the government in the initial lot isn't known. The company, however, sold around 10,000 of the tablets (branded UbiSlate for the retail market) online for around Rs2,500 each before retiring, perhaps in the wake of the controversy, the first version of the tablet, and promising the launch of an upgrade, UbiSlate 7+. Communications and information technology minister Kapil Sibal recently said on the sidelines of an education conclave in Kolkata that the process will start again in May.

While Quad claims DataWind hasn't paid it, the Canadian company alleges that its former partner infringed its intellectual property rights and tried to sell directly to the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Rajasthan, the government-run technology school vested with the responsibility of procuring the tablets.

"They did not pay us and we have already served them a legal notice," said a Quad executive, who did not want to be identified. He added that the company's lawyers are studying further options.

Suneet Singh Tuli, chief executive of DataWind, refuted this claim in an email to *Mint*. "DataWind's relationship with Quad ended because Quad circumvented DataWind's relationship with IIT-Rajasthan and signed a separate MoU (memorandum of understanding) directly with IIT-Rajasthan. The two of them collaborated to try and create an Aakash-2 competitor, but were unsuccessful." He added that the company had been paid for most of the units it had assembled, barring 600 for which IIT-Rajasthan is yet to pay.



The Quad executive said his company assembled 20,000 tablets, but stopped delivery after 10,000. "They (DataWind) couldn't work with the government, did not respect our contract, and are not even standing by their promises to the consumers," he said.

Tuli didn't disclose either the number of people who have booked the tablet or those who have paid an advance. "We will provide an update on the number of pre-bookings, units delivered and schedule to clear the backlog at our launch event, planned for the third week of this month," he said in his mail. In an earlier interaction, on 6 March, he had said the company had received three million bookings for UbiSlate 7+ and hoped to launch its new tablet in a few weeks.

Tuli said in his mail that the company had appointed new partners to assemble the tablet, but didn't identify them.

New Delhi-based Panchanan Bisoi, though, is still waiting. He ordered a UbiSlate 7+ online for Rs2,999 and paid the entire amount in February. He has since been corresponding with the company, but said he hasn't heard back from it. "The toll-free number doesn't work and emails are not being replied to. It may turn out to be a failed project," he said.

Tuli ascribed the delay to the time it took to find a partner. "We do understand the concern customers have because of delays, but we expect to have caught up on deliveries for pre-paid customers shortly, and are actively offering full refunds to anybody that does not wish to wait any longer. The very large majority of customers are standing by us, and new pre-bookings keep flowing in at a very strong pace," he wrote in his mail.

He also said that anyone who had paid in advance heard back from the company in 48 hours and was given an email address and phone number to call "instead of the toll-free number".

Online consumer forums don't bear that out. A consumer named Sandhya Bhadauria said on [www.grahakseva.com](http://www.grahakseva.com) that she booked a tablet in December, paid the entire amount, and was promised delivery in the first week of April. She said she has been unable to reach the company since. Another, J.K. Soni, wrote in the same forum that he paid an advance for delivery of the UbiSlate 7 in February. He said the company hasn't been responding to his emails and phone calls.

*Mint* couldn't independently ascertain either the identity of these customers or the veracity of their claims.

*surabhi.a@livemint.com*