

Aakash 2, the cheapest tablet PC, misses May-end deadline

Harsimran Julka, ET Bureau Jun 2, 2012, 01.17AM IST

NEW DELHI: India has missed yet another deadline for the launch of much-hyped world's [cheapest tablet PC - Aakash 2](#) - the dream project of human resource development minister [Kapil Sibal](#), even as the wait continues for the country's 220 million students.

In March, Sibal had made a commitment that the device would be ready by end of May. Priced at about Rs 2,276, Sibal had positioned the new and improved version of Aakash as an educational aid for Indian students. He had also reiterated in the Lok Sabha that the government is working on an improved tablet after the first one proved to be a damp squib due to low battery life and slow processor speed.

An email query to the minister's office on status of Aakash 2 remained unanswered. But officials working on the project told ET on the condition of anonymity that the tablets and associated apps are being tested at the Indian Institute of Technology in Mumbai.

Amidst much fanfare, Sibal had first talked about the tablet in 2010. The plan then was to make a cheap laptop available to schools by January 2011, but that was not to be as [HCL Infosystems](#), the firm that had been contracted to manufacture, backed out. Subsequently, in February, the government selected Canada-based [Datawind](#) for the \$35-tablet project.

Indian Institute of Technology, Rajasthan, was mandated to design the features and procure the tablets, which were to be assembled in India by Datawind. For its part, Datawind launched a commercial version of the product called Ubislate-I in 2011, and then failed to supply Aakash on time, causing much concern.

"Many people confuse Ubislate with Aakash, as it carries the same specifications and is made by the same vendor. It is giving a bad name to the government's project as customers of the commercial similar product are complaining of non delivery," said a senior government official on condition of anonymity.

Datawind ended the relationship with Hyderabad-based Quad Electronics, its Indian manufacturing partner, causing delays in the supply of tablets. Datawind was supposed to supply 1,00,000 tablets to IIT-Rajasthan.

Since then, Datawind has contracted Hyderabad-based VMC Systems to supply the tablets. About 50 people have reportedly been poached by VMC Systems from Quad Electronics who were earlier working on the Aakash assembly line.

But VMC Systems vehemently denied it saying it employs about 800 people, and can redeploy them anytime. "We do not need to employ people from outside," said a VMC official. "We are unnecessarily being dragged. The quarrel is between Quad and Datawind," he added.

Aggrieved consumers are already posting messages in online forums complaining about non-delivery of Ubislate and asking for refunds. But Suneet Singh Tuli, CEO of Datawind, alleged that rivals are posting such messages. "We have started delivering thousands daily," he said.

