

BSNL forced to pay more spectrum charges:

Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd., which is already reeling under severe financial crisis, is being forced to pay hiked spectrum charges, while private mobile companies have been given temporary exemption.

BSNL, which is likely to report loss for the first time in its history for the last fiscal (2009-10), will have to bear financial implications worth over Rs.700-800 crore every year. All pleas by BSNL Chairman and Managing Director Kuldeep Goyal to Telecom Secretary P.J. Thomas, seeking exemption from paying hiked spectrum usage charges till the matter is finally settled has so far gone unheard.

In February, the Department of Telecom (DoT) decided to hike the spectrum usage charges for all mobile players (GSM and CDMA) as per the spectrum being held by them. The hike was in the range of 1-2 per cent and supposed to come into force from April 1.

However, private players immediately moved the Telecom Disputes Settlement & Appellate Tribunal (TDSAT). It stayed the order and asked the DoT to continue taking the existing charges till the matter is resolved. All the companies that approached the TDSAT got the relief; but being a government-owned firm, BSNL did not approach the TDSAT. Since then, BSNL has been paying more spectrum usage charges.

In his letter to the Telecom Secretary last month, Mr. Goyal said: "Being a 100 per cent government-owned PSU, BSNL would not like to challenge the DoT order. Therefore, it is requested to kindly extend the benefit of TDSAT order to BSNL also, in order to protect its interests and ensure a level-playing field."

"In case, it is not possible to extend the benefits to BSNL straightaway, at least an assurance may kindly be given to BSNL that benefits, if any, of final judgment of the TDSAT shall be extended to BSNL also from the date applicable to other operators," he added.

Now, after seeing no support coming from the government and in view of the PSU's bad financial condition, its executives have decided to take the fight to the court themselves to safeguard BSNL's interests.

"It is a serious issue... while we are being forced to pay despite financial difficulties, private operators are making merry. We are writing to the Telecom Secretary to exempt us also from the hike order or we, as principal stakeholders in the company, will move court seeking relief and refund of the amount so far. If the department cannot take legal action, we certainly can do so," said Sanchar Nigam Executives Association (India) general secretary G.L. Jogi.

DATED:16/06/2010