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## BSNL Extends Bid Deadline for Mobile Networks Plan in Naxal-hit Regions

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Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd has extended by a week the May 2 deadline for submission of bids towards a mobile networks rollout in India's Naxal-prone regions after lukewarm response from global telecom equipment vendors.

A BSNL director told ET that foreign telecom gear suppliers had not participated in the tendering exercise yet as "they seemed uncomfortable with a clause that mandates selected vendors to maintain mobile networks in Naxal infested states for five years apart from handling network gear supplies and rollout".

BSNL plans to award contracts to two vendors in the 70:30 ratio. "During recent pre-bid meetings, global telecom gear suppliers were reluctant to participate in the bidding as they felt that managing and maintaining mobile networks in Naxal-hit regions is risky," said the BSNL official, who was present in these meetings. But he declined to name the companies. A top executive of a leading foreign gear maker conceded that the "additional responsibility of maintaining expensive solar-powered mobile networks in Naxalite hotbeds is fraught with significant business risks".

But BSNL isn't too perturbed as it has received bids from several local suppliers, including L&T Ltd, Himachal Futuristic Communications Ltd, VNL, ITILtd and Toshniwal Industries Ltd, said another company official. Though it is hopeful that the additional time may ring in a wider bidder response, BSNL is under increasing pressure from the DoT, the home ministry and the Prime Minister's Office to speed up mobile coverage in regions prone to Left-wing extremism.

This is since successive Naxal attacks have lately killed many CRPF jawans and, recently, even election personnel. As a result, BSNL has decided to open technical bids on May 9 and price bids by May 25. The project has been further delayed after Telecom Commission asked BSNL to invite fresh bids from equipment suppliers after its initial tendering exercise was scrapped over cost issues.

The highest decision-making body in the communications ministry has also asked BSNL to ensure final project cost is within the ₹3,046-crore limit fixed by the Cabinet last year. This was after Universal Services Obligation Fund, which will fund the proposed mobile rollout, dismissed BSNL's 28% cost hike proposal and sought the TC's intervention. BSNL has to establish mobile connectivity in 1,836 regions across nine states, which have been identified by the home ministry Naxal-prone. These initial coverage is proposed in Jharkhand, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, MP and Andhra Pradesh.