

Govt moves cabinet note to procure five million Aakash tablets

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Even before the government has fully received the first set of the low-cost Aakash tablet computers it had ordered, the human resources development (HRD) ministry has moved a cabinet note that calls for the distribution of an additional five million such devices.

Canada-based **Datawind Ltd** had been signed up to supply 100,000 tablets. Supplies haven't been completed as the devices came in for heavy criticism over quality standards. Minister for communication and human resource development Kapil Sibal had announced the tablet's launch in October last year.

A fresh tender will be floated for the new set of devices, said at least two HRD ministry officials, who didn't want to be named.

"We have improved the product and are now going for a bigger tender. We will select a company or more than one through a competitive bidding process to supply the next tranche of low-cost computers," said one of the ministry officials, confirming that a cabinet note had been moved by the ministry.

A second ministry official said the proposal may come up before the cabinet next week. The official added that Sibal is also in touch with other ministries, seeking support for the move.

At its launch, the Aakash was priced at ₹2,276. The ministry had also said that the tablet, aimed at bridging the digital divide, would be available to college students at a 50% discount.

"We have not revised our price point in spite of upgrading the features in the device," the second official said.

Datawind has started supplying the upgraded version of the tablet to the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Bombay,

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which is evaluating it, and this new device was likely to be launched in October, *PTI* said.

"In the next few weeks, it should be launched. I do not have the exact date, but HRD minister (Sibal) has said he wants to launch on the anniversary date, which is 5 October," Datawind chief executive Suneet Singh Tuli told the news agency.

The upgraded version will be launched soon, Tuli said in an email. "I believe the launch is imminent, but a few days here or there shouldn't matter."

Tuli said Datawind started supplying the upgraded version, Aakash 2, to IIT Bombay a month-and-a-half ago.

According to the revised agreement with Datawind, the new version of the tablet has a better battery and a capacitive touch screen among other new features at the same price.

The Aakash project has been mired in several controversies since its launch last year. Supplies were stopped when quality problems surfaced. Later, a scrap also broke out between the manufacturer and its erstwhile assembly partner, Hyderabad's **Quad Electronics Solutions Pvt. Ltd.** A tussle between Datawind and IIT Jodhpur, which had been mandated to oversee the project, led to the latter being replaced by IIT Bombay.

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