



Dr Manmohan Singh

Our Bureau

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The Prime Minister, Mr Manmohan Singh, wants the Department of Telecom to refer the 2G spectrum allocation policy to an Empowered Group of Ministers headed by the Finance Minister, Mr Pranab Mukherjee.

This is being seen as yet another move towards sidelining the Communications and IT Minister, Mr A. Raja, whose controversial decision on allocating 2G airwaves earlier on a first-come-first-serve basis is under investigation.

This is not the first time in the last two years when the Prime Minister has had to intervene in telecom-related policy issues. The Prime Minister had earlier got the GoM to also decide on allocating 3G and broadband spectrum. Decision relating to turning around State-run Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd has also been entrusted to a committee headed by Mr Sam Pitroda.

The latest move to get the 2G spectrum referred to the GoM comes in the wake of a controversial report by the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India suggesting hefty one-time fees from existing GSM players for holding spectrum beyond 6.2 Mhz. TRAI has been sharply criticised by incumbent players — including Bharti Airtel, Vodafone Essar and State-run BSNL — for allegedly being biased towards new GSM players who do not have to pay anything. Even Tata Teleservices has criticised TRAI for suggesting that operators with start-up spectrum should get additional spectrum first. Reliance Communication has come out in support of the regulator, along with some of the new GSM players such as Etisalat DB.

A note from the Prime Minister's Office to DoT said: “Strong and divergent views have been expressed by various stakeholders in representations. It may also be desirable to take a decision on the recommendations after ensuring full deliberation on all aspects. An EGoM has been constituted on vacation of spectrum and auction of 3G spectrum. DoT is advised to consider widening of

the mandate of the aforementioned EGoM to also include taking a view on the TRAI recommendations.”

The DoT Secretary, Mr P.J. Thomas, refused to comment on his response to the PMO note.

Incumbent GSM players will be relieved if the Telecom Ministry agrees to refer the issue to the GoM as they had refused to take part in the ongoing consultation by TRAI.

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