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MEASAT IN NEGOTIATIONS WITH PRODUCTION HOUSE IN MUMBAI FOR DTU

By: Mahesh Prasad

NEW DELHI, April 4 (Bernama) -- Even as a report from Kuala Lumpur speaks of the Malaysian media major, Measat, negotiating with several Indian production houses for a joint venture, the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) has launched a low cost Direct-to-User (DtU) service.

The service, which marks the beginning of ISRO's ambitious foray into DtU television, started from the beginning of 1997. It is currently being beamed to 150 villages in the tribal district of Jhabua in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, says a report in the financial daily, the Business Standard.

The service will be expanded to cover rural areas all over the country within a few years with the launch of a dedicated satellite "Gramsat," the report says.

A Kuala Lumpur-dated story in the English daily, the Times of India, reporting about the negotiations, says "Though officials are tightlipped, a Mumbai-based production house is understood to have been identified as a potential partner."

The negotiations follow a Dec 19 government notification which had the effect of ruling out an early launch of a DtU television service by Measat.

The report also says that the initial stage of negotiations have been carried out with Business India Television and Sun TV, though key issues such as sharing of investment and revenue in the event of forming a tripartite alliance are being discussed.

Reports about negotiations between Measat and Sun TV had earlier appeared in other Indian papers too.

The Times of India report quoted Paul Edwards, Chief Operating Officer of Astro, the digital DtU service in Malaysia as saying that the company had successfully launched the service and had already achieved a penetration of 50,000 subscribers.

"We intend to expand it to one million over a five-year period," he was quoted as saying.

He was reported to have told the paper that over US\$200 million (RM500 million) had already been invested in the development of the ambitious All Asia Broadcast Centre in Kuala Lumpur's Technology Park, making it the largest single digital broadcast and production complex in the world.

Astro, which uses cutting edge digital broadcasting technology, says the paper, is part of the Multimedia Super Corridor, brainchild of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohammad, who intends positioning the country as a fully developed nation by 2020.

Apart from India, Measat's high-power KU-band covers the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, Taiwan and eastern Australia -- all considered key markets.

India's Minister for Information and Broadcasting C.M. Ibrahim told a press conference today that the government "has not given permission to any private agency to provide DtU service in the country."

He said: "In fact, the government is in the process of introducing a draft Broadcasting Bill in the current session of Parliament and till such time the bill is passed, no DtU service can be operated or provided by any private agency.

"In the circumstances, there is no question of the government giving licences for possession, dealing and distribution of equipment meant for receiving DtU services."

The general public was cautioned "not to be carried away by the publicity of foreign TV companies and not to subscribe to DtU services being offered by them lest they may be liable for prosecution under the Indian Telegraph Act, 1995."

Asked what was the position regarding the government's MoU with Measat, Ibrahim said "we have not given any thought to it as the law is in the offing."

Earlier reports had said that India's Information and Broadcasting Ministry had submitted a proposal to the Cabinet to renew the MoU which expired last year. -- BERNAMA

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