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Tejas Networks, Mavenir Systems keen to supply gear to test BSNL's commercial 4G network: ITI

NEW DELHI: State-run ITI Limited through a non-commercial tie-up has partnered with homegrown Tejas Networks and Mavenir Systems as well as system integrators - Tech Mahindra and Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) to deploy core and radio network for Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited's (BSNL) fourth generation or 4G services foray, as part of a pilot initiative.

"This (BSNL supply) is an opportunity for us. We are looking at Indian companies that can transfer technology so that we can manufacture equipment," RM Agarwal, chairman, ITI Limited told ETTelecom, adding that the firm has already partnered with homegrown companies which were keen to supply radio access and core network for the Proof-of-Concept (PoC).

"ITI has been in discussion with companies such as Tech Mahindra, Tata Consultancy Services, Tejas Networks and Mavenir Systems, and they already have non-commercial Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with ITI, and shown their keen interest towards serving forthcoming BSNL 4G order through their indigenous 4G technology, and ready to prove the same through the Proof-of-Concept," the company said.

On January 12, ITI floated a request for proposal (RFP) inviting competitive commercial offers from domestic companies to jointly bid for BSNL's 4G equipment supplies.

The state-controlled enterprise is aggressively eyeing to supply next-generation of telecom gear to BSNL in line with the Centre's ambitious Atmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India) initiative that aims to reduce country's dependency on imports.

The public sector firm already enjoys a 20% reservation in telco's order, as a part of a policy initiative.

"Indian companies are capable of supplying core and radio on a turnkey basis as indicated by the state-owned telecom operator. We are ready to partner with Indian companies that meet tender conditions, and have already invited proposals from them," the top executive said.

"Once we start Proof-of-Concept (PoC) with local companies, then we can decide the services part keeping strict service-level agreements (SLA) which is typically about 30% of the radio network cost," Agarwal added.

Bengaluru-based telecom gear maker Tejas Networks has developed a centralised RAN or C-RAN architecture for 4G, 4G+ and 5G networks while Mavenir Systems, the US-based company, according to Agarwal, has also developed core network locally, and is ready to transfer technology to the state-run company for large scale manufacturing.

Companies vying for BSNL's 4G supply include Korean Samsung, Finnish Nokia, Swedish Ericsson as well as homegrown companies such as HFCL Limited, Tejas Networks, Sterlite Technologies, Polycab India, and large system integrators such as L&T and HCL, in addition to state-owned Telecommunications Consultants India Limited (TCIL) and ITI Limited.

Earlier, the eight-member committee, headed by DoT member (technology) K Ramchand said that a comprehensive Indian telecom stack needs to be put together with a focus on indigenous manufacturing and national security.

Last year, the government had amended the General Financial Rules 2017, restricting companies from countries sharing a land border with India - such as China and Pakistan - from securing government contracts, potentially barring Chinese Huawei and ZTE from bidding.

Pushing foreign vendors to back foot, public-owned company has prepared its blueprint to manufacture 4G and 5G eNodeBs and related network elements, as a part of its efforts to consolidate various components so that the country's telecom sector relies on local companies to achieve self-reliance.

Early this month, BSNL invited fresh proposals from suppliers as well as consortiums for planning, testing, deployment and annual maintenance of 57,000 sites for upcoming 4G network across the country on a turnkey basis following the Department of Telecommunications' (DoT) recommendation to include homegrown companies.

The fourth-largest telco that has recently taken over counterpart Mahanagar Telephone Nigam Limited's (MTNL) Delhi and Mumbai network operations, had to scrap its notice inviting tender, it released on March 23, 2020 after a series of allegations from homegrown companies citing inclusion of restrictive conditions that potentially debar them.

BSNL is set to start trials on the 2100 MHz spectrum band that would be allocated administratively and funded by the Centre through capital infusion at a value of Rs 20,140 crore while the GST amount of Rs 3,674 crore would be borne by the government through budgetary resources.