Extend equipment testing deadline: Telcos to Centre

Guidelines to come into effect on July 1 but companies seek extension

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New Delhi, 5 June

Telecom operators have sought to put off the implementation of the new guidelines for mandatorily testing telecom equipment by one year, citing inappropriate laboratory infrastructure in the country.

The Mandatory Testing and Certification of Telecom Equipment (MTCTE) regime is set to come into effect on July 1. Under it all the pieces of telecom equipment have to be tested and approved at local laboratories before they can be installed as part of network roll-outs.

Telecom companies, however, through industry body Cellular Operators Association of India (COAI), have told the government that the needs of the industry remain unmet and the deadline must be extended.

"If the government makes a policy, one which we feel is the right way forward, saying that all equipment should be security tested before it is put on the circuit, there should also be an ecosystem in place to test such equipment. That is why we have been asking for an extension of the deadline," S P Kochhar, director general, COAI, told *Business Standard*.

Testing labs are inspected and designated by the Telecommunication Engineering Centre, the technical wing of the Department of Telecommunication (DoT). The TEC website showed there are 62 such lab units across the country. It has also drawn up 'Essential Requirements' for as many as 65 separate types of telecom equipment.

According to industry insiders, both domestic and international investors were in a wait-and-watch mode and had recently begun to invest in the sector. They said it would take time for the sector to become established.

The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology carries out compulsory registration of specified goods — such as laptops, wireless keyboards, PoS machines, and other electronic equipment — under the Electronics and Information Technology (Requirement for Compulsory Registration) Order, 2012.

The DoT has specified the MTCTE under the Indian Telegraph (Amendment) Rules, 2017, for equipment capable of being used for telecommunications.

In June 2022, it extended the implementation of the regime by a year after industry stakeholders argued strongly against it, pointing out that the country's upcoming 5G rollout plans would be hit badly. But the government is unlikely to yield this time, officials hinted.

"We have received industry representation against the existing date. It has been pointed out to them that there is now a significant number of laboratories operating in the country, and the numbers will rise quickly in the coming months," a senior DoT official said.

Not ready yet

Earlier, neither the government nor industry considered setting up a large industry focused on product testing, he said. "Telecom networks are suddenly growing very fast. So testing requirements have also gone up. The way these labs are being set up is not keeping pace with requirements," Kocchar stressed.

Telecom companies believe the government can easily revise the list of network equipment falling under the MTCTE guidelines, or at least postpone the start date of the new regime, considering it has already done so for certain product categories. In April, the DoT exempted items, such as mobile handsets, smart watches, smart cameras, and point of sale (PoS) terminals from the ambit of the regime.

Consumer products, such as TVs, refrigerators and whose primary function is not telecom but which have telecom interfaces such as Bluetooth, WiFi, are not covered under the MTCTE. It is also not applicable on optical fiber cable used in patch cords.

TESTING TIMES

- **Mandatory testing and certification of telecom equipment** (MTCTE) regime set to begin on July 1
- **Aim is to standardise telecom equipment guidelines** and streamline compliances
- **DoT's technical wing TEC designates** domestic equipment testing labs
- **TEC has approved 62 labs,** notified essential requirements for 65 products
- **Satellite communication, network vendor players** have also sought extension of deadline