

Thailand's bid for high-speed Internet stalled

The Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) -- Thailand's bid to catch up with neighboring countries on advanced telecommunications technology has stalled after a court Thursday ruled to suspend a bidding process for 3G licenses.

The ruling means more delays for bringing the fastest Internet technology to Thailand, which is one of the only countries in Southeast Asia without third-generation capabilities. Poorer neighbors such as Cambodia and Laos already have 3G, which allows faster upload and download speeds.

The Supreme Administrative Court upheld a lower court's injunction against a much-awaited 3G mobile license auction organized by the National Telecommunications Commission, saying the agency did not have the authority to put the licenses up for bidding.

The court also dismissed an argument from the commission, which said the absence of 3G network would hinder the performance of state agencies and other public service providers.

The auction must now wait until the Constitutional Court determines if the National Telecommunications Commission has the authority to hold the sale - or until Parliament moves to set up a new regulator. The auction was originally scheduled for Monday.

State-run CAT Telecoms Plc. had initially appealed to the Central Administrative Court to block the auction, saying its interests would be damaged and the country's telecoms regulator had no authority to offer the licenses. CAT Telecoms objects to the sale of the licenses to private firms because it says 3G customers will be able to use the 2G network the company currently provides to its customers but wouldn't be paying for it - their fees would be going to their 3G provider, instead.

CAT Telecom argued the National Telecommunications Commission cannot sell the licenses because it was formed under Thailand's 1997 constitution, which was replaced after the 2006 coup. The new Constitution, approved in 2007, requires a new independent body to regulate the mobile phone network frequency.

"The NTC must put on hold the 3G license auction until this court case is over," said the judge. Should the auction go on, it would "lead to more damage and would be difficult to solve afterward."

Until the new auction takes place, the court ordered the commission to return the auction deposits, of 1.28 billion baht (\$41.6 million) each, to the three bidders, Advanced Info Service Pcl., Total Access Communication Pcl., and True Corp Pcl.

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Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva said Wednesday his government wanted to see 3G services available in Thailand as soon as possible.

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