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BSNL scales down communication plans in Naxal-hit states

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KOLKATA: National security appears to have taken a backseat and reining in costs is the government's immediate mission when it comes to keeping tab on Maoists through mobile phones. The home ministry has asked BSNL to scale down its mobile communications infrastructure rollout plans in all Naxal-prone states across eastern, southern and central India to keep the project subsidy requirement on a tight leash.

It has concurred with the view of telecom department officials managing the 17,000-crore Universal Services Obligation Fund (USOF) that BSNL's mobile coverage in Naxal-infested states should be only confined to major human habitation zones and not the forests. Ironically, the home ministry appears to be indifferent to the fact that most left wing activists take sanctuary in the forests, which is why they've been so difficult to track over the years.

Not too long ago, the home ministry had accorded high priority to the project after a host of districts across Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh bore the brunt of recent attacks on mobile infrastructure and OFC routes. More so, since private mobile phone companies were averse to venturing into these woods.

But the home ministry appears to have softened in stand on the intensity of mobile coverage in naxalite territories after USOF managers and BSNL came at loggerheads over the funding of this high security mobile infrastructure venture. While the loss-making BSNL demanded central subsidy as it felt the project was commercially unviable, the USOF managers refused to play ball.

Finally, after a string of meetings where top officials from the home ministry, telecoms department and BSNL were present, the USOF Administrator has agreed to consider subsidy payout only if BSNL sharply scales down its mobile coverage plans in states with a heavy naxalite presence.

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