Indian tribunal split on 3G roaming case

July 3 2012

Bharti Airtel launches Airtel's 4G services in Kolkata in April. India's telecoms tribunal delivered a split ruling Tuesday on a challenge by mobile phone operators to a government ban on forming roaming pacts to provide 3G services outside their licensed zones.

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When the government auctioned 3G licences in 2010, none of the leading operators -- Bharti Airtel, Vodafone India and Idea Cellular -- managed to get bandwidth in every one of India's telecom service areas.

However, the three companies then formed mutual roaming pacts, allowing them to offer 3G services across most of the country.

In December last year, the telecoms ministry ruled the pacts illegal and ordered the agreements to be scrapped.

The order was stayed pending an appeal to the Telecom Disputes Settlement and Appellate Tribunal -- a quasi-judicial body that rules on disputes in the telecom and media sectors.

Tuesday's decision saw the two-member tribunal divided, with one judge ruling in favour of the operators' petition and the other siding with the government.

The case is now expected to go to a higher court for a final ruling.

Indian telecom companies currently generate only small revenues from data services but they expect the market to grow exponentially as less than 10 percent of the 1.2 billion population has access to Internet at the moment.