

**TELECOMMUNICATIONS**

# Uncertainty persists over orbital rights

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The appointment of a new prime minister could add uncertainty to the country's efforts to maintain the rights to use the 50.5° East orbital slot before it expires on Nov 27.

The Constitutional Court recently ruled to remove Srettha Thavisin from the post of prime minister and Paetongtarn Shinawatra was subsequently appointed as the country's new premier last week.

The issue of orbital rights was not listed on the meeting agenda of the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC) on Aug 14.

The telecom regulator has yet to discuss the matter with the caretaker Digital Economy and Society (DES) Ministry to seek a joint resolution of the orbital issue.

Following the appointment of the new premier, a new cabinet will then present its policies to parliament before it begin to govern.

A telecom veteran who requested anonymity said the change of the prime minister created a decision-making vacuum on the orbital issue.

This makes it more difficult for Thailand to retain the orbital rights, said the industry veteran.

NBTC chairman Dr Sarana Boonbaichaiyapruk said the NBTC board on Aug 14 did not make any progress regarding the orbital issue after no company submitted a bid to secure the rights to use the two slot packages of 50.5° E and 142° E on the bid submission date of July 23.

The NBTC has yet to finish sorting out a resolution to this issue, he said.

Dr Sarana said this is a serious issue

and the NBTC will have to thrash out a practical resolution with related parties, especially the DES Ministry.

He said the cost of hauling a satellite into position at the 50.5° E orbital slot is roughly US\$10 million.

Dr Sarana said the regulator is obliged by the NBTC Act to take responsibility for maintaining the country's rights to the satellite orbits. In addition, the rights to use the orbital slots have to be awarded solely by means of an auction.

The regulator was originally slated to auction the rights to the two slot packages of 50.5° E and 142° E on Aug 24 in a bid to put the former slot to use.

Only two companies, TC Space, a subsidiary of Thaicom, and Prompt Technology, picked up bid envelopes. However, neither submitted the bid documents by the July 23 deadline.

As a result, in July the NBTC board unanimously gave its approval to the sale of the rights to use the two slot packages via a combination of two methods — an open direct award and a beauty contest — representing a U-turn on the original auction method agreed on.

The two slot packages are unsold from the previous licence auction of the rights to use satellite orbits in 2023.

The regulator also assigned the NBTC office to ask the cabinet about the government's policy related to the two unsold slot packages.

NBTC commissioner Sompop Purivigraipong, who is in charge of the telecom sector, said the NBTC has tried to maintain the country's rights to use the two slots before their expiration date as ruled by International Telecommunications Union (ITU), especially the 50.5° E slot.

Mr Sompop said the draft of the new rights awarding method would be finished by August and it is expected to be effective for the auction in September.

In parallel, Mr Sompop said the board ordered the office to ask the ITU for extension periods to use both slots, pending the planned auction.

The NBTC has also assigned its management to conduct a study on the possibility that the NBTC itself would be the party that maintains the rights to such unsold slots and propose the study's results to the board.

Mr Sompop said it is unclear whether the NBTC can act as an operator to reserve the rights to use orbital slots by renting a satellite and dragging it into the 50.5° E slot before the deadline.



**This is a serious issue and the NBTC will have to thrash out a practical resolution with related parties.**

**DR SARANA BOONBAICHAIIYAPRUCK**  
Chairman, NBTC