

India's top court postpones Bharti boss hearing

NEW DELHI, INDIA: India's highest court has indefinitely postponed a hearing for telecom tycoon Sunil Bharti Mittal over corruption allegations involving the allotment of telecom airwaves.

Mittal, chief of Bharti Airtel, India's biggest mobile firm, was only last month personally dragged into the second-generation (2G) spectrum allocation controversies that have shaken the country in recent years.

But the Supreme Court late Friday said Mittal's hearing on the allegations was being "postponed" until further notice.

At the same time, the court ordered the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to respond to Mittal's challenge of the police agency's summoning of him within four weeks.

The police agency alleges former Indian telecom secretary Shyamal Ghosh conspired with now-deceased telecom minister Pramod Mahajan to allot extra spectrum in 2002 at below-market prices to the companies.

Allegations

The agency alleges the events, said to have taken place under the previous Bharatiya Janata Party government, deprived the treasury of 8.46 billion rupees (US\$156m) in lost revenues.

This case is separate from a massive 2008 spectrum allocation scandal in which India's Congress government allegedly under-priced spectrum and favoured certain firms, costing the treasury up to 176.64 billion rupees (US\$32bn).

Some 19 people, including former telecom minister A. Raja, have been charged in the 2008 case.

Bharti Airtel along with Vodafone's India unit were charged last December with alleged irregularities in the 2002 airwaves allotment.

But it was only last month Mittal and Ravi Ruia, a former executive of mobile company Hutchison-Essar, now owned by Britain's Vodafone, were named in the cases.

Ruia has also been told he does not have to appear in court immediately.

Special CBI Judge O.P. Saini, who summoned the businessmen in March, had said they represented the "will of each company" and there was enough "incriminating" evidence to proceed against them.

Both the companies and individuals have denied any wrongdoing and Bharti has said the extra 2G spectrum allocation was to "improve the quality of service".

Source: AFP, via I-Net Bridge

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