

**Chairpersons of the Steering Committees set up in the High  
Courts for the implementation of eCourts project  
(November 15, 2008 – New Delhi)**

Address by Justice K.G. Balakrishnan, Chief Justice of India

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ICT (Information and Communication Technology) enablement of judiciary is being pursued vigorously across the world. In India, ICT enablement of higher judiciary started in early nineties, covering the Supreme Court and all the 21 High Courts. We have reached a stage where deployment of ICT in the Supreme Court and the High Courts has reached a significant level of maturity. However, the lower judiciary, i.e. district and taluka courts across the country are largely untouched by the ICT revolution. The eCourts scheme aims to deploy ICT tools in the functioning of the lower courts across the country. The project envisages deployment of hardware and software for district and taluka courts to facilitate their day to day functioning. Key functions such as case filing, allocation, registration, case workflow, orders and judgments will be IT-enabled. Cause-lists, Case status, orders and judgments will be made available on the web and made accessible to litigants, advocates and the general public. The project aims to build a national grid of key judicial information available '24/7' in a reliable and secure manner.

The first phase of the eCourts project was approved in February 2007. The duration of this phase is 2 years with a planned expenditure of Rs. 442 crores for different components of the project. Along with ICT implementation in district and taluka courts, the project will also manage the upgradation of ICT infrastructure at the Supreme Court and all High Courts.

National Informatics Centre (NIC) is the implementing agency for the project. The project is being implemented under the guidance and support of the E-Committee. The office of the E-Committee provides the valuable interface with the higher judiciary, and also supplements NIC in all aspects of implementation. E-Committee Chairman, Shri Balasubramanyan, has been personally visiting all High Courts and continuously engaging with all High Courts for successful implementation of the project. The Department of Justice is providing key support for project monitoring and evaluation. The Department is reviewing the progress of the project on a weekly basis and the Project Monitoring Committee consisting of the Department, E-Committee and NIC meet every month to review and carry forward the project. NIC team is continuously working towards making this project a success. Barring one High Court, all High Courts have appointed Central Project Coordinators for managing the implementation of the project.

Phase 1 of the eCourts project is envisaged to be implemented in 2 years with the objectives deploying ICT in district and subordinate courts and the upgradation of ICT infrastructure in the

Supreme Court and all the High Courts. Admittedly, the project will not be able to achieve all its targets in a 2 year period, however, in the last few months, considerable progress has been made. Looking ahead, the High Courts will have to play a larger role in successful and timely implementation of the project. NIC has engaged consultants for project management support at the Centre. The plan is to deploy one consultant at each High Court to facilitate the implementation of this project. The onus will be on the High Courts to provide timely support and timely information to these consultants in order to ensure adherence to the designated timelines.

I would like to discuss some of the key project components, their current status, and the constraints being faced in their implementation. One of the first activities under the project was that of providing a laptop and laser printer to all judicial officers in the country. Considering the huge scale of this exercise it was decided that all ICT systems and applications will be based on open source technologies. Accordingly, the laptop provided was running on Linux Operating System. Service support has been an area of concern and NIC along with the vendor is continuously evolving better ways to manage the same.

After providing laptops to all judicial officers, NIC provided internet connectivity at the residence of judicial officers through BSNL. Internet connectivity has also been provided at district and taluka court complexes across the country. The project envisages provisions of the facility for 2 years after which the respective High

Courts will have to take over the responsibility with the assistance of state governments.

Training on Linux Open Office and other related open source applications was provided by a NIC empanelled vendor. The training has now been completed in most parts of the country. However, the feedback on the same indicates that majority of the judicial officers and other personnel are not satisfied with the performance of the vendor. NIC has now decided that all training aspects of the project will be taken over by the technical manpower which will be deployed shortly for a period of 18 months.

ICT systems and applications will be deployed across 13,000 courts in 2,900 court complexes across the country. Judicial service centres will be provided in each court complex. A server room is also being constructed in court complexes which have more than one court. NIC has circulated guidelines for the preparation of these sites and has sent funds for approximately 1,500 court complexes with an average allocation of Rs. 2.75 lakhs per site. Site preparation is now at a position where the allocation of Rs. 36 crores is near exhaustion, accordingly, the remaining High Courts may get funds only for district court complexes. This action is in line with the current thought process of NIC, Department of Justice and E-Committee to implement the project in a phased manner, with i) district court complexes being implemented first, followed by ii) taluka court complexes across the country.

Site preparation is the most critical activity in the project and unless it is completed on time, deployment of hardware, software and technical manpower will also get delayed. High Courts are requested to expedite the preparation of sites and communicate the same to NIC through i) updating the status on the 'Project progress monitoring website'. ii) sending site readiness certificate for each site. Hardware and technical manpower will not be sent for those High Courts where the site preparation is not completed. Many court complexes require fresh construction of computer rooms, such as those in Uttar Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan and Uttarakhand. This construction would not be covered under the eCourts scheme and it is incumbent upon the High Courts to seek funds for the same from the respective state governments.

NIC has developed a website titled 'Project Progress Monitoring System' for the eCourts project. High Courts have shown active participation in uploading data on the website. The website today has 2,280 court complex registrations which includes 756 district court complexes and 5,545 judges' registration. Other relevant information such as the availability of videoconferencing facilities, DG sets, hardware at district and taluka courts is also being collected through the website. All High Courts should promptly provide information required by the NIC through this website and ensure that the data provided is complete, accurate and validated before being sent. High Courts that have uploaded data on this website are requested to update it on a regular basis. It is foreseeable that this website could

well become the single most important source of information on the progress of the eCourts project.

NIC is currently in the process of empanelling vendors for providing networking and hardware for the eCourts project. For court complexes which have sent the site readiness certificate, purchase orders will be issued for the required hardware. High Courts are requested to update the status of existing hardware in district and taluka court complexes under their jurisdiction on the project monitoring website. This will help NIC in assessing the requirements and placing the purchase orders accordingly. High Courts are also requested to provide support to the vendors engaged for conducting site survey, networking, delivery and installation of hardware.

The eCourts scheme has allocated Rs. 43.8 crores for upgradation of ICT infrastructure at the Supreme Court and all High Courts. This translates into planned expenditure of approximately Rs. 6.5 Lakhs per judge. NIC has received proposals from High Courts totalling Rs. 110 crores. NIC is currently in the process of rationalising items and preparing guidelines based on which, the hardware will be provided. It should be kept in mind that High Courts are at varying levels of maturity with regard to their ICT infrastructure. The E-Committee and NIC are working on a methodology for ensuring equitable distribution of hardware to the various High Courts.

NIC is in the process of issuing job orders for deployment of technical manpower in all High Courts and District Courts. At present,

one technical personnel is being sent to all High Courts and District Courts. This person will be deployed for a period of 18 months for providing support in all aspects of project implementation. High Courts will play a key role in the selection of these personnel. NIC and E-Committee's office will shortlist candidates offered by the vendor. The list of these candidates along with their resumes will be sent to 'selection committees' at each High Court for interviews and final selection. High Courts are requested to expedite the formation of these selection committees and the finalisation of candidates. The roles and responsibilities of these technical personnel are being communicated to all High Courts.

Under the eCourts project, videoconferencing facilities will be provided at 500 locations across the country. These locations include district court complexes and their corresponding jail complexes. NIC is currently in the process of empanelling vendors for this exercise. Some district courts already have videoconferencing facilities and may not need assistance from the project. The High Courts are requested to update the project monitoring website concerning the availability of videoconferencing facilities at locations in their respective jurisdictions.

The eCourts project envisages the availability of one DG set at each court complex in the country. Since many court complexes already have DG sets, High Courts are requested to provide information on the availability of the same in each court complex in their respective jurisdiction. Though the project will fund the provision

of the DG set, all cabling costs connecting the DG set to the ICT infrastructure and recurring expenditure such as fuel and periodic maintenance will have to be borne by the court itself.

The project envisages deployment of a standardised application in all district and taluka courts. An Experts Committee for software selection was formed under the chairmanship of Justice P.K. Balasubramanyan. The Committee has decided to adopt a software already being used in one of the states for 'pilot implementation' in various locations all over the country. Based on the feedback received, the software will be suitably modified to make it usable across the country. A uniform application software for the whole country's judicial system would enable seamless sharing of information across a 'National Judicial Data' grid. High Courts are requested to facilitate the testing of software in the courts under their jurisdiction. A detailed list of suggested pilot locations will be given to all participants.

Keeping in view the budgetary provisions for the eCourts projects, it is expected that the services required for not only development and implementation of application software but also troubleshooting and maintenance of the computer servers are expected to increase manifold. It is understood that NIC is short of technical manpower and in the long run it is essential to enhance ICT services support in the courts themselves.

In this regard, a proposal can be mooted for the creation of about 100 technical posts of varying hierarchical positions for the Supreme Court and all 21 High Courts. These technical personnel will be responsible for conducting training and trouble-shooting. The NIC will continue its involvement in developing the software applications. The proposed technical personnel can be recruited to posts created exclusively for the judiciary and can be transferred from one court to another. Such measures will ensure that none of these personnel will be able to establish contacts with the interested parties (such as vendors for the various IT enabled services) on a long-term basis.

More importantly such an approach will also ensure a necessary segregation between the strategic control of application software and data integrity on one side and the provision of support services and overall management of IT facilities in a High Court on the other side.

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