

Antrix-Devas Deal: Ex-ISRO Chief Madhavan Nair Speaks To Asian Scientist Magazine

Monday, January 30, 2012

<http://www.asianscientist.com/features/antrix-devas-deal-isro-chief-madhavan-nair-banned-from-government-jobs-2012/>

AsianScientist (Jan. 30, 2012) - Indian scientists, particularly those in the space sector, are up in arms against a recent order by the Indian government banning four former top ISRO officials, including ex-chairman G. Madhavan Nair, from holding any government jobs or being a part of any government committees for their role in the Antrix-Devas deal.

The other three are K. R. Sridhara Murthi, former director of the Antrix Corporation; A. Bhaskar Narayana, former ISRO scientific secretary; and K. N. Shankara, former director of the ISRO Satellite Center.

Antrix - the commercial arm of ISRO - had signed a deal with private firm Devas Multimedia Pvt. Ltd. agreeing to give it two communication satellites. The agreement was annulled last year, and the main charge against the four officials is that they did not inform the Union Cabinet about the Devas deal.

The stiff order that triggered this controversy is the result of a probe conducted by the government. To make matters worse, the minister of state in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), V. Narayanswamy said that the action against the ISRO scientists was meant to be a warning to the entire Indian scientific community.

His remark attracted widespread criticism, forcing him on Sunday to backtrack on his original stance.

“We are ready to consider representation from the scientists. Mr. Nair and other scientists have helped develop the country. They have been instrumental in not only launching satellites, but taking us to the moon through Chandrayaan-1. It is because of them that we reached the sixth place in space in the world. We do want to create a situation where scientists are demoralized. If they give us a representation we will consider it,” Narayanswamy said.

On Sunday, Nair forwarded a representation to the PMO seeking a revocation of the ban order. In the document, which has yet to be officially released, Nair openly blamed present ISRO chairman K. Radhakrishnan for the crisis.

The unfortunate developments have highlighted the deep divide between those loyal to Nair and those to Radhakrishnan.

Nair denies violating any rules

Speaking to *Asian Scientist Magazine*, Nair denied that either he or his colleagues had flouted any rules while firming up the deal. He emphasized that since Antrix Corporation was a public sector undertaking, rules stipulate that the Union Cabinet need not be informed that the satellites would be used by a private firm, which in this case was Devas.

Nair said the government had violated rules by not providing an opportunity to the four scientists to present their point of view. According to him the two spacecraft would have ushered in an era of new technologies which would have benefitted the rural area.

“We have lost a golden opportunity,” Nair regretted.

Sridhara Murthi echoed the views of Nair, while adding that the order will undoubtedly damage the image of ISRO and also its marketing capability.

Reacting to the order, none other than the chairman of PM’s scientific advisory council, C. N. R. Rao, asked:

“Are scientists worse than criminals? Why are you treating scientists worse than corrupt? This is not the way to speak about scientists,” Rao said.

Former chairman of Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), Anil Kakodkar reasoned that new technologies require fresh bold steps, and that the Antrix-Devas deal was meant to involve new technologies.

“I think there should be willingness to take bold steps,” Kakodkar said. “Yes, I agree, rules have to be adhered to. But if new areas are not explored it can prove disadvantageous,” he added.

Prasad: Major financial deals have proper oversight

In a telephone interview with *Asian Scientist Magazine* from Bangalore, former BARC director, A. N. Prasad said:

“He (V. Narayanswamy) shoots off his mouth. What sort of a statement is this? Is he aware that there are checks and balances in the space and atomic energy departments, and a single chairman cannot take decisions unilaterally?” he asked.

“If the scientists are blamed, then what about the role of ministers, bureaucrats and politicians? Does it mean that only scientists can do something wrong?” he said.

Prasad said that in the space and atomic energy departments, serious decisions involving major financial implications are not taken by any single scientist, but by space and atomic energy commissions having representatives from different departments.

“For example there is a representative from the Prime Minister's Office, present and former scientists, and a financial representative,” Prasad told our correspondent.

Though another former AEC chairman M. R. Srinivasan did not focus on the minister's controversial remark, he pointed out that scientists of the departments of space and atomic energy have always acted with integrity.

“What has happened in my opinion is only an aberration,” Srinivasan said.

“In my opinion it is a grave omission of not mentioning to the Union Cabinet that the two communication satellites will be used by Devas. It was certainly an extraordinary lapse. I repeat what has happened is only an aberration, and I do not believe that such a thing has happened in any other areas of the departments of space and atomic energy,” he added.

Former project director of Chandrayaan-1's Moon Impact Probe, Madan Lal remarked:

“I wonder what kind of value can you give to these kind of statements. It is extremely strong and can be demoralizing and humiliating. It will demoralize people who work in hi-tech areas. It can certainly prove disadvantageous to future projects of ISRO,” he stated.

[Editor's note: This is a developing story.]

Copyright: Asian Scientist Magazine.

Disclaimer: This article does not necessarily reflect the views of AsianScientist or its staff.