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GOV'T GIVES 3RD TELCO WANNABES SOME WIGGLE ROOM

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The Duterte administration will extend its March 2018 target to name a new telco industry player as potential bidders balked at the tight deadline during the first of a series of public consultations on Wednesday.

Private sector bidders, including listed NOW Corp. and privately-held satellite broadband operator G. Telecoms Inc., expressed worries about the timing, given that the new telco player selection guidelines would only be out Feb. 19—or about a month before their proposals should be submitted.

The March 2018 deadline was set in line with President Duterte's orders for a new challenger to compete with the PLDT Inc. and Globe Telecom duopoly at the soonest possible time.

"We will certainly adjust

the timetable," said Eliseo Rio Jr., acting secretary at the Department of Information and Communications Technology (DICT), during the event yesterday.

He noted, however, the DICT could only extend the deadline by one to two months, or no later than May 2018.

"We could not wait for one year. I'm sure the President will not only ask us to resign, but actually kick us out," Rio said. These concerns, he said, would be raised in a Cabinet meeting on Feb. 5.

Sundance Apolinario, chief information officer of G. Telecoms, said the March 2018 deadline was not feasible at all.

"I don't think anybody can [meet that schedule], otherwise they are telling a lie," he said, citing the time it would take to form a consortium and finalize a detailed rollout plan to effectively compete against PLDT and Globe. "Maybe we would need another month."

The DICT estimated that a new player could spend anywhere from P150 billion to P300 billion in its first five years of operation.

Apolinario said they were currently in talks with partners and would likely tie-up with a US-based telco.

For its part, NOW Corp. said it would also need more time as it negotiates with domestic and foreign partners.

"Definitely we will participate, that's for sure," Kristian Pura, NOW's head of business development, said.

NOW, whose shares gained about 14.7 percent yesterday, is one of three local groups that have expressed interest to become the country's third telco, according to Rio.

The other two were Philippine Telegraph & Telephone Corp. and Converge ICT Solutions Inc. Telcos from China, Japan, Taiwan and South Korea also made known their intentions to join. INQ

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* TELECOMMUNICATIONS

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