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India's Simputer set for May rollout

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BANGALORE: A low-cost handheld computer developed by seven Indian engineers to take the Internet to rural masses will start rolling out in May, the head of a firm pioneering the project said.

The "Simputer", short for simple, inexpensive, multilingual, is championed by its followers as a friend of the poor, but some of its supporters add that its features match cool and trendy handhelds like those built by Palm.

Originally expected to cost \$200, it would now cost \$50 more, Vinay Deshpande, chief executive of Bangalore-based Encore Software, said on Wednesday.

The colour screen version is priced at \$300.

"We hope to produce 50,000 Simputers in the first 12 months and take it to 300,000-500,000 in two years," Deshpande said.

Built by the non-profit Simputer Trust, the device is slightly larger than a regular handheld PC, and uses the free-to-use Linux operating system.

Its software is expected to aid farmers seeking to know commodity prices and beat middlemen and also provide speech recognition in regional languages to help illiterate rural folk.

At \$250, the Simputer will be three times cheaper than a PC, and cost about the same as a colour TV set, a price level which is expected to help spread computers to the corners of India, two-thirds of whose one billion people live in rural areas.

India's current installed base of computers is around six million.

"We have orders for 1,000 Simputers from firms in healthcare and co-operative banking including few state governments," said Deshpande, whose firm is one of the two key licence holders of the Simputer.

Deshpande and two of Encore's other co-founders are part of the Simputer Trust, which developed the device with a group of computer scientists from Bangalore's prestigious Indian Institute of Science.

The Simputer hooks up to the Internet and accommodates individual smart cards which store personal data to allow it be shared by many users. The software also translates English and regional language text into speech.

Encore is initially targetting the institutional and corporate market instead of tapping retail users which requires large marketing investments, Deshpande said.

"We are currently working to make enhancements like giving it an international style, greater memory and stronger battery power," he said. The device was first unveiled last April.

Encore has given contracts to two Bangalore-based companies to manufacture the Simputer and formed a joint venture with a Singapore-based company to market the device in Asia.

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