Despite snag, CAT officials hopeful of wrapping up test procedure in time

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Ahmedabad, Nov 30: In spite of the technical snags in the initial three days of the first online common admission test (CAT), the authorities are firm to wrap up the entire test procedure within the stipulated time frame against the scepticism about its timely completion.

The CAT authorities on Monday assured that there would be no requirement of the extension of test period, which is spread across November 28- December 7. "We have some spare capacities at each of the centres, however, some of them might be full on some slots. The students would require to choose from the available slots and they would be accommodated accordingly," said SK Barua, Director IIM-A.

Recognizing the inconvenience caused to the students Barua mentioned that due care would be taken for the convenience of the students, "However, students would have much options to choose for their preferred slots. We do recognize their inconvenience and sympathize with them," he added.

The first online CAT, which is being con-

File photo of IIM-Bangalore

ducted at over 300 labs at 105 centers in 32 cities, had faced some glitches in the first three days of the test. The CAT authority today revealed that about 7,000 to 8,000 students were affected due to the technical snag in the system and were to be rescheduled thereby. "Out of the total 361 labs, about 47 labs shut down on the first day due to virus attack on the servers. The systems were quarantined and put on check for further virus possibility. The number of closed labs reduced to 33 on the second day and we expect this number to further come down as days go by," said Barua.

CAT convener Satish Deodhar men-

tioned that of the total 70,000 students appeared so far during the three days of the test, about 10-11% of them would be required to reschedule.

Country's prestigious competitive exam, CAT for the first time went online and its technical responsibility was given to an American software solutions provider Prometric. Prometric officials mentioned that despite considering some of the key security aspects like biometric identification and picture-based identification, the technical hitch could not be avoided.

"We were unable to get off all the viruses and it struck the system. There are instances when despite your system being full proof you may get caught up with some virus. However, we are trying hard to improve the network and believe to get things in order in short time," said Charles Kannan, COO, Prometric.

The viruses, that attacked the system are said to be some of the sophisticated ones which required further sophistication of anti-virus software. "Conflicker, and W-32 Ninda are the viruses that have held up the entire system," said Saumitra Roy, MD (India), Prometric.

Put CAT back in the bag
IIMs' brand requires quick solution to the test fiasco

FOR 33 years, brand IIM has been manning its gates with a pen and paper CAT. This year, it made the decision to upgrade the entrance test to new millennial standards by bringing it online. The move had been in the making for some time, as the number of aspirants multiplied every year and their paper trail became increasingly difficult to manage. There were other logistic challenges. A leaked question paper in 2003 led to a retest. In 2006, the paper had printing errors. Faculty resources absorbed in supervising the test also kept growing. So, when IIMs announced they would be switching to computer-based testing, the move was widely hailed. A tender to the effect attracted companies with both domestic and international backgrounds. The five-year, $40 million contract was finally won by the local arm of US-based Prometric, which in turn is a subsidiary of Educational Testing Service. ETS is not only the world's largest testing company, operating in around 180 countries, it also administers Toefl and GRE assessments; Prometric itself provides exams for IT heavyweights such as Infosys, HP, Apple and Microsoft. So far, so good. CAT's CBT debut had been placed in safe hands. Then, things fell apart this weekend. Around 10% of the applicants couldn't take the test as systems failed at around 14% of the centres. Viruses and malware were held responsible. But media reports clearly show that lack of D-day preparedness was much more widespread. Even at centres where the tests went through, students complained about computers starting late or shutting early. Actual time deficits aside, the resulting chaos didn't make for ideal testing environments. Complaints have also poured in about how exam labs were equipped and how staff were trained. A replacement test has been scheduled, but affected students remain confused about exactly how that would work out, and whether it may clash with other commitments. In short, CAT's promised technological upgrade has turned into the kind of bungled mess with which Indians are all too familiar.

You could put the blame on the test vendor. Certainly, Prometric should have conducted comprehensive trial runs, or at least responded to the muddle in a more customer-friendly fashion. But, ultimately, it's the IIMs that must bear the brunt of blame and brand impact. What's good management? Anticipating and averting problems, and competently redressing them when they can't be controlled. There was failure on all these fronts. That technical glitches took place was one thing, that there was no back-up plan in place is another. Remember, IIMs are set to go on an expansion spree. To those who argue that adding seven new IIMs to the existing seven is going to strain resources and affect quality, it's said that IT will obviate this threat—a theory that's gotten a good bashing through the CAT fiasco. Good IT also needs good management. So the circle goes.