Pakistan Military Makes Tablets

Chris Brummitt, Associated Press

KAMRA, Pakistan (AP) — Inside a high-security air force complex that builds jet fighters and weapons systems, Pakistan's military is working on the latest addition to its sprawling commercial empire: a homegrown version of the iPad.

It's a venture that bundles together Pakistani engineering and Chinese hardware, and shines a light on the military's controversial foothold in the consumer market. Supporters say it will boost the economy as well as a troubled nation's self-esteem.

It all comes together at an air force base in Kamra in northern Pakistan, where avionics engineers — when they're not working on defense projects — assemble the PACPAD 1.

"The original is the iPad, the copy is the PACPAD," said Mohammad Imran, who stocks the product at his small computer and cell phone shop in a mall in Rawalpindi, a city not far from Kamra and the home of the Pakistani army.

The device runs on Android 2.3, an operating system made by Google and given away for free. At around $200, it's less than half the price of Apple or Samsung devices and cheaper than other low-end Chinese tablets on the market, with the bonus of a local, one-year guarantee.

The PAC in the name stands for the Pakistan Aeronautical Complex, where it is made. The PAC also makes an e-reader and small laptop.

Such endeavors are still at the pilot stage and represent just a sliver of the military's business portfolio, which encompasses massive land holdings, flour and sugar mills, hotels, travel agents, even a brand of breakfast cereal.

The military is powerful, its businesses are rarely subject to civilian scrutiny, and it has staged three coups since Pakistan became a state in 1947. Many Pakistanis find its economic activities corrupting and say it should focus on entirely on defense.

"I just can't figure it out," said Jehan Ara, head of Pakistan's Software Houses Association, said of the PACPAD. "Even if they could sell a billion units, I can't see the point. The air force is supposed to be protecting the air space and borders of the country."

Supporters say the foray into information technology is a boost to national pride for a country vastly overshadowed by archrival India in the high-tech field. Tech websites in the country have shown curiosity or cautious enthusiasm, but say it's too early to predict how the device will perform. Skeptics claim it's a vanity project that will never see mass production.

Only a few hundred of each products has been made so far, though a new batch will be completed in the next three months.

"The defense industry is trying to justify its presence by doing more than just produce weapons," said Ayesha Siddiqa, author of Military Inc., a critical study of military businesses. "Some smart aleck must have thought we can make some money here."

PAC's website at http://www.cpmc.pk says the goal is "strengthening the national economy through commercialization" and lauds the collaboration with China — something that likely resonates among nationalists.

China is regarded as a firm ally by Pakistan's security establishment, whereas the U.S., despite pouring billions of dollars in aid into the country, is seen as fickle and increasingly as an enemy.

These perceptions have heightened as the U.S. intensifies drone attacks on militants based in the Pakistani borderlands. But the military is also a target of those militants. In 2007 the base at Kamra, home to 12,000 workers and their families, nine people died when a cyclist blew himself up at the entrance.

PAC officials suggested the program that produces the PACPAD was modeled in part on the Chinese military's entry into commercial industry, which lasted two decades until it was ordered to cut back lest it become corrupted and lose sight of its core mission.

The tablet and other devices are made in a low-slung facility, daubed in camouflage paint, near, a factory that produces J-17 Thunder fighter jets with Chinese help.

"It's about using spare capacity. There are 24 hours in a day, do we waste them or use them to make something?" said Sohail Kalim, PAC's sales director. "The profits go to the welfare of the people here. There are lots of auditors. They don't let us do any hanky-panky here."

PAC builds the PACPAD with a company called Innavtek in a Hong Kong-registered partnership that also builds high-tech parts for the warplanes.

But basic questions go unanswered. Maqsood Arshad, a retired air force officer who is one of the directors, couldn't say how much money had been invested, how many units the venture hoped to sell and what the profit from each sale was likely to be.

The market for low-cost Android tablets is expanding quickly around the world, with factories in China filling most of the demand. Last year, an Indian company produced the "Aakash" tablet, priced at $50, and sold largely to schoolchildren and students.

Arshad said a second-generation PACPAD would be launched in the next three months, able to connect to the Internet via cell phone networks and other improved features. He said the Kamra facility could produce up to 1,000 devices a day.

During a brief test, The tablet with its 7-inch screen appeared to run well and the screen responsiveness was sharp.

"It seems good, but operation-wise I have to look into it," said Mohammad Akmal, who had come to the store in Rawalpindi to check the product out. "Within a month or so, we will know."

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