Pakistan May Soon Allow Private Radio, TV Stations
By Daniel Pearl

ISLAMABAD (Dow Jones)-- Pakistan's cabinet is scheduled to consider long-awaited legislation Wednesday that would allow the establishment of private radio and television stations in Pakistan, Information Secretary Syed Anwar Mahmood told the Wall Street Journal Tuesday.

Mahmood, who is also chairman of the government television broadcasting monopoly Pakistan Television Corp., said that if the cabinet approves the bill, it would become law "within a week or so," allowing the first radio and television licenses to be granted "within the first half of this year."

Many of the licensing terms are still uncertain, since Pakistan would set up a Pakistan Electronic Media Authority to decide how to award licenses and set rules of operation for TV and radio stations. Mahmood said no foreign ownership would be allowed, but private broadcasters would be allowed to provide news and current affairs as well as entertainment.

"The restrictions will only be in terms of our cultural norms and social norms, nothing beyond that. Those are universal," he said. "We want airing of more and more views, otherwise there is no need for private broadcasting." Still, he said some restrictions could be imposed in the event of war.

Pakistan's government has been promising a private broadcasting bill for more than two years. Mahmood said the delays were "more procedural than anything," caused by changes within the information ministry, and the need to get versions of the legislation approved by Pakistan's law ministry.

Five new players are likely to emerge in private television including three newspaper groups.

A television analyst said the advertising budget for the electronic media in Pakistan is about 2.5 billion rupees ($1=PKR60.15), of which 5%-7% goes to satellite channels while the bulk is for the state-run television.

Three private Pakistani channels - Indus Vision, Indus Music and ARY Digital - are already on air but they are beamed from overseas locations.

"Pakistan has a limited advertising market. It is yet to be seen how many stations" will emerge, Mahmood said. He said his ministry is considering applications to allow Pakistani-owned foreign channels to uplink programming from Pakistan. "It will be a great help, then they don't have to send canned programs to Hong Kong or London, they can do live programs from Pakistan."