

SIM re-registration a must

Govt to create subscriber database to prevent crime using mobile phones

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All mobile phone users will have to re-register their numbers by the end of this year as the government has decided to prepare a new database of subscribers to check criminal activities through cellular networks.

If they fail to get their mobile numbers re-registered with proper identification, their connections will be blocked immediately.

The decisions came yesterday at a meeting of the posts and telecommunications division with Bangladesh

Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC), security agencies and top officials of different government-owned telecommunications companies.

The meeting, however, did not say anything about a timeframe for the start of re-registering SIM (subscriber identity module) or RUIM (removable user identity module) cards.

Talking to The Daily Star after the meeting, Tarana Halim, state minister for the posts and telecommunications ministry, said, "We have found that

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mobile connections are the sources of all criminal activities like militancy and abduction. So we are going for the re-registration of all existing numbers."

The move came a month after a meeting of Digital Taskforce, chaired by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, where senior ministers raised the fake SIM registration issue, saying law enforcement agencies cannot arrest those who commit crimes using SIMs registered with false information.

The prime minister instantly instructed the BTRC chief to come up with a solution.

There are 12.87 crore active mobile subscribers in the country, according to latest statistics from the BTRC, the telecom regulator.

Wishing anonymity, a top official of a private mobile operator told The Daily Star that at least 70 percent of the subscribers do not have proper registration.

However, the government is faced with a mammoth task if it wants to complete the re-registration process by the end of this year.

The state minister herself admitted that this is going to be a tough job. "The government still wants to do it for the sake of security," she said.

In 2008, the BTRC initiated a re-registration process but was not successful as there was no national identification (NID) database at the time. But now the Election Commission (EC) has an NID database.

The state minister said the telecommunications division would request the EC to allow mobile operators to access the database so that they can verify identities of the persons applying for SIM/RUIM registration and re-registration. The BTRC will supervise the re-registration process.

Manzurul Alam, former chairman

of BTRC, said it would be the first step towards ensuring telecommunications related safety.

"It is a good step. For ensuring security, the government needs to come up with a solution about proper mobile phone registration," said Alam, adding the government also needs to give some time to operators as the number of active SIMs is quite high.

Experts said security of e-commerce and e-banking issues also depends largely on proper SIM registration. So the government should be tough on the issue.

Mobile phone operators too welcomed the decision.

"This is something we have been waiting for," said Mahmud Hossain, chief corporate affairs officer of Grameenphone. "We have been asking for access to the NID database."

Another senior executive of a mobile operator, on condition of anonymity, said, "We have to go for the re-registration to clean up the mess in the market."

The meeting also decided to revisit the existing telecommunications laws to strengthen the telecommunications related activities and take tough action against illegal call termination (VOIP) and fake or unregistered SIMs.

The BTRC recently seized a huge number of unregistered SIMs. The state minister directed the regulator to seek explanation from the operators in this regard.

"If the mobile operators fail to explain, we can impose fines on them as per laws," said Tarana.

The BTRC imposes a \$50 fine for each unregistered SIM.

Tarana said she would sit with the mobile operators some time this week to discuss all the decisions taken at the meeting.