



Pakistan Demands Cell Phone Users Get Fingerprinted

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WASHINGTON—Pakistan is telling cellphone users they must register their identities by entering fingerprints in a national database, a move the government sees as a way to combat terrorism but one that has privacy experts wary.

Mobile phone users have a deadline this week to match their SIM cards with their fingerprints that will be collected and stored by the government.

Officials in Islamabad have said those mobile users who don't or can't register their fingerprints and SIM cards by the deadline will have their service cut off. "Subscriber Identity Module" or SIM cards are used by mobile devices to identify specific users and allow them access to their service.

But given the enormous size of the task, and the widespread use of mobile phones across Pakistan, that's increasingly unlikely. While some Pakistanis have been critical of the shortened timeline, they still support the overall goal of fighting terror that is rampant in the country.

Pakistan has seen an unprecedented increase in violent extremism in the last decade. Tens of thousands of civilians have died in bomb attacks. People have been targeted and killed for expressing liberal ideas.

"I have two SIMS which I am using since five years," said Sadat Ali, an attorney in Peshawar. "The biometrics team came to our office located on the premises of the courts in Peshawar and they verified my SIM. It's never too late, but it should have been done before."

The Pakistan Telecommunications Authority has estimated there are approximately 130 million mobile phone users in Pakistan – over 70 percent of the population - and many of those users are clamoring for the latest 3G and 4G phones. It's likely that there are many more SIM cards in use in Pakistan, making the approaching deadline an unprecedented challenge.

But as reported by the *Washington Post*, only 38 million mobile users have registered 53 million SIM cards with their fingerprints.

The *International News* reports that Pakistani authorities are considering extending the registration deadline, but remain firm that once that new deadline is passed, unregistered SIM cards will no longer be usable.

The massive biometric data collection plan is part of a larger security crackdown in Pakistan following a string of terror attacks, including one in December at a Peshawar school that killed 150 people, most of them students.

Because mobile phones have been used in some of these attacks to trigger explosions, officials in Islamabad hope establishing links between SIM cards and individuals will help combat terror attacks.

But some cybersecurity analysts have their doubts.

“Mass surveillance of an entire population is traditionally the hallmark of a totalitarian state,” says Patrick Eddington, policy analyst in civil liberties and homeland security at the Cato Institute. “This SIM card registration campaign is a clear indicator that, unfortunately, Pakistan is on the path to becoming a truly totalitarian state.”

A former CIA intelligence analyst, Eddington calls the SIM card plan a “tacit admission” that Pakistan’s intelligence service, the ISI, has proven itself unable to penetrate terror cells using more traditional human and signals intelligence tools. Beyond the potential abuses of an individual’s privacy, he says such a massive collection of data as is being proposed will likely have little to no effect.

“Terrorist groups survive in part because they’re adaptable,” he told VOA. “So this campaign in Pakistan will not actually solve the problem because the terrorist groups will change their communication techniques and modalities in order to get around this SIM card registration campaign.”