

Pakistan asks users for fingerprint identification or face cancellation of mobile services

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In a bid to rapidly process biometric data collection to curb terrorism, the Pakistan government has called on citizens to either provide their fingerprints in time or face cancellation of their cellular services, IBN Live reported.

However, as the task of fingerprint scanning of the country's million-odd population entailed massive amount of work, phone companies were dispatching outreach teams deep into the countryside and mountains to notify customers of the policy.

According to a report in The Washington Post, mobile companies had until 15 April to verify the owners of all of the SIM cards that carried subscriber's personal security and identity information.

People whose finger prints were not in the database that was first created in 2005 would need to first submit them to the National Database & Registration Authority.

Some residents, including several million Afghan refugees were not eligible for citizenship, and would need to obtain a court affidavit attesting they would use their cellphones properly.

The past six weeks had seen 53 million SIMs belonging to 38 million residents verified through biometric screening, but there still remain 50 million more SIM cards that needed verification.

Meanwhile, according to Pakistan's News International, Pakistani authorities were considering extending the registration deadline, but remained firm that once that new deadline had passed, unregistered SIM cards would no longer be usable, Voice of America reported.

The massive biometric data collection plan formed 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.

As mobile phones had been used in a number of attacks of the kind to trigger explosions, officials in Islamabad hoped establishing links between SIM cards and individuals would aid in countering terror attacks.

However, some cybersecurity analysts had their doubts.

According to Patrick Eddington, policy analyst in civil liberties and homeland security at the Cato Institute, mass surveillance of an entire population was traditionally the hallmark of a totalitarian state.

He added the SIM card registration campaign was a clear indicator that Pakistan was on the path to becoming a truly totalitarian state.