# Bahrain says no plans to ban BlackBerry services

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(AP) -- Bahrain's foreign minister said Sunday the country has no plans to follow its Persian Gulf neighbors in banning some BlackBerry services because security fears do not outweigh the technological benefits.

His comments come as device maker [Research in Motion](#) Ltd. is facing opposition by a number of countries around the world, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in the Gulf, to the way its encrypted e-mail and messenger services are managed.

Bahrain's Sheik Khaled bin Ahmed Al Khalifa told The Associated Press the handheld devices raise legitimate concerns, but that his nation has decided that banning some of the phones' features is "not a way of dealing with it."

"We're not saying there is no security concern," Sheik Khaled said in an interview. But, he added: "There are many other ways for the criminals or terrorists to communicate, so we decided we might as well live with it."

Canadian-based RIM is negotiating with Saudi authorities to avoid a ban on messaging services on the devices, while neighboring UAE is planning an even more sweeping crackdown on the data services starting in October.

Both countries have cited security concerns. Critics contend that the

countries, which maintain tight controls on the media, are also motivated by a desire to monitor users' speech and political activity.

Sheik Khaled said Bahrain fully respected the decisions taken by other Gulf states regarding the devices, and declined to comment on the motivation behind their moves.

However, he said his country - a small island kingdom that hosts the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet - does not see a need for a ban on BlackBerry messaging or other data services for now despite the security concerns.

"It's not a way of dealing with it. We will really kind of lose a lot of communication freedom just for the sake of dealing with one matter," he said.

Local media in Bahrain have reported that authorities are cracking down on the spread of some types of news and information via BlackBerry.

Sheik Khaled acknowledged there were "some concerns raised" but said sharing information using the devices remains legal. Authorities were aiming instead to warn users against spreading slanderous and libelous information, he said.

The tech-savvy foreign minister posted a statement to his Twitter account Thursday that he said came from the country's crown prince, Sheik Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa. In it, he quoted Sheik Salman offering assurances no ban on messaging was planned, saying a decision to halt the service would be "ignorant, short sighted and unenforceable."

Late Saturday, Saudi Arabia's telecom regulator said it was giving mobile operators more time to finalize a deal to allow BlackBerry messaging to continue, staving off a ban of the service in the Arab world's largest economy.

The oil-rich kingdom's Communications and Information Technology Commission said companies had 48 hours ending Monday to test a system that would allow them to avert a ban.

"Considering the efforts made by mobile phone service providers toward meeting CITC's organizational requirements and fulfilling license conditions, they were given an additional grace period of 48 hours, which ends on Monday, in order to test the proposed solutions," the regulator said in a brief statement. No details were provided.

Saudi officials told The Associated Press that RIM has reached a preliminary agreement with Saudi regulators that would allow the government some access to users' data, and that authorities were examining how such a system might be implemented.

They say the plan involves placing a BlackBerry server inside Saudi Arabia, which already has strong controls on the Internet to block morally offensive and political content and maintains strict controls on freedom of expression.

RIM has declined to comment on the state of negotiations. Saudi Arabia's three mobile operators couldn't be reached.

A deal that allows Saudi officials to access user data in the conservative Islamic country could set a new precedent for how technology companies and governments interact around the world.

A number of countries say they see BlackBerry devices as a security threat because encrypted information sent on them is difficult, if not impossible, for local governments to monitor when it doesn't pass through domestic servers.

The UAE has said it plans to block BlackBerry e-mail, Web browsing

and messaging services starting in October. India, Indonesia and Lebanon have also raised concerns about the devices.

Simon Simonian, a telecoms analyst at Dubai-based investment bank Shuaa Capital, said the way Saudi Arabia solves its impasse with RIM could provide a model for other countries eyeing BlackBerry crackdowns.

"Everybody will be closely monitoring the developments in Saudi Arabia to see if it could set an example and become a template for resolution in the UAE or other countries," he said.

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