

# Pakistan tightens cellphone control after Taliban massacre

February 26 2015, byAsif Shahzad

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In this Wednesday, Feb. 25, 2015 photo, people get their cell phone SIM cards verified in Islamabad, Pakistan. Pakistanis have been lining up to scan their fingerprints and verify their identities in order to keep their cell phones, as part of stepped up security measures in the wake of the December Peshawar school attack. (AP Photo/B.K. Bangash)

(AP)—Almost every Pakistani citizen has a cellphone, but from now on, Big Brother is checking to make sure their name, number and fingerprints are on record. The measures are meant to tighten control of

cellphones and avert their use for militant attacks after the Taliban massacre two months ago at a school in Peshawar.

Since the new measure was announced earlier this year, Pakistanis have been lining up at cellphone stores and in front of mobile vans and kiosks around the country to scan their fingerprints and verify their identities in order to keep their phones.

They have to show their IDs and fingerprints. If the scanner matches their print with the one in a government database, they can keep their SIM card. If not, or if they don't show up, their [cellphone service](#) is cut off.

In a country where many people get by without electricity, heat or running water, cellphones are one of the few technological advances that are so ubiquitous that most people cannot imagine their lives without one.

The Dec. 16 Pakistani Taliban attack on the school in Peshawar, which killed 150 people, most of them schoolchildren, shocked the nation.

It was a watershed that prompted a series of government measures, including intensifying a military offensive launched in June against militant strongholds. Authorities also introduced military courts to try terrorism-related suspects and stepped up financial monitoring to make it harder for militants to transfer money.

As for cellphones, the government last year introduced biometric machines designed to check users' identities—making the check mandatory for anyone who wants to get a new SIM card.

But in the wake of the Peshawar attack, they're now checking all users, regardless of when they got their SIM card, to make sure those who have

been issued a SIM card are actually the ones using it. The project has been portrayed as a way to curb the use of cellphones by militants and criminals in planning or carrying out attacks.



In this Wednesday, Feb. 25, 2015 photo, a man gets his fingerprints scanned to get a cell phone SIM card verified in Islamabad, Pakistan. Pakistanis have been lining up to scan their fingerprints and verify their identities in order to keep their cell phones, as part of stepped up security measures in the wake of the December Peshawar school attack. (AP Photo/B.K. Bangash)

In explaining the measure, Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan told lawmakers earlier this month that he was sure the terrorists "will lose a big weapon."

A police official investigating the Peshawar attack said at least two of the SIM cards recovered from the scene were issued under the names of

two residents of Punjab province. The two later told authorities their names were misused. The police official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss details of the investigation.

There are about 103 million SIM card holders in Pakistan and the goal is to re-check everyone by April 13, said Kurram Mehran, a spokesman for the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority.

Pakistan's five cellular companies worked with the PTA to install fingerprint scanning devices around the country, Mehran said. Already about 60 million SIM cards have been verified and 7 million blocked, he said. Punjab province chief minister Shahbaz Sharif said Wednesday that it was costing the government "millions of rupees."

It's not clear whether this will affect foreigners as well, or how many foreigners residing in Pakistan have cellphones from local providers. Amir Pasha, a spokesman for one of the providers, Ufone, said that so far they are only verifying Pakistanis with national ID cards.

Cellphone companies have launched advertising campaigns and sent mobile vans around the country to win the people over. Their websites warn SIM card holders of impending cutoff dates.

Some Pakistanis are frazzled at the added bureaucracy, while others agree the measure could help curb illegal cellphone usage.



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"Those who have some bad intentions and are misusing cellphones will not turn up for this verification. They know how to get their way," said Hussain Khan as he waited in line at a cellular phone company office in Islamabad. He said he had been there for 10 minutes and expected it might take another 30 to get to the front of the line.

Badshah Hussain, a 38-year-old vegetable vendor, was a bit more upbeat.

"This will not only help curb crime and terrorism but also protect people from ... problems and troubles," he said. For example, no one could use his name to illegally get a SIM card and then commit a crime, he added.

Cellphone companies will hold on to the scanners so that future SIM card buyers can be verified in the same manner, according to two PTA officials who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to the media.

The former head of the National Counter Terrorism Authority, Khawaja Khalid Farooq, said the verification could help authorities trace cellphone users who commit crimes.

Previously, he said, SIM cards were often issued on fake ID cards. But he cautioned that oversight had to be consistent going forward and warned that criminals and terrorists always find new ways to cheat the system.

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