

Singapore cracks down on mobile-phone abuse

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Tracing calls and going through phone logs to see where and when criminals telephoned is routine work for policemen everywhere and is used as evidence in courts worldwide as well. In recent years, though, police efforts have been thwarted by the advent of the prepaid cellular phone, which has allowed criminals to buy handsets incognito and use their minutes without leaving a trace of their calling records.

In an effort to crack down on such illicit use of prepaid mobile phones, the Singapore government announced Friday that it will require users to register with service providers as of Nov. 1 amid heightened fears of terrorism.

"Criminals exploit the anonymity of prepaid (subscriber identification module) cards to avoid detection. Terrorist groups like the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam have done so too. In the region, we have seen Jemaah Islamiyah elements using prepaid SIM cards extensively to avoid detection," Wong Kan Seng, deputy prime minister and minister for home affairs said in a news release.

"Singapore must address this problem urgently as there are over 1.4 million local prepaid SIM cards, comprising 35 percent of the mobile market, in circulation today," Wong added. The cards were first introduced in Singapore in 1999, and the market has grown a whopping 120 times, according to some industry estimates.

In order to meet the latest government regulations, purchasers of SIM

cards will have to provide personal information to the network providers electronically in order to get their services activated, while even those who already have prepaid phones will have to re-register their details. The information will be available to the country's telecommunications regulator Infocomm Development Authority as well as the Ministry of Home Affairs.

If they fail to do so by May 1, their phones will be deactivated, the government said. Furthermore, users will have to be at least 15 years old, and customers will be limited to buying 10 cards each.

Singapore is not, however, the only country to introduce such measures. Thailand, Taiwan, Malaysia and the Philippines have all recently introduced similar policies regarding prepaid cell-phone registration, especially as cell phones have been known to be used as triggers to detonate bombs as terrorist activities continue to plague southeast Asia.

"In Songkhla (Thailand) this April, three simultaneous bombings happened in the evening. All three bombs were detonated using mobile phones, possibly utilizing prepaid SIM cards," Wong said.

But perhaps in order to justify further Singapore's reason for stopping prepaid cell phones from being anonymous, Wong pointed out that countries outside the region including Switzerland and Australia already require prepaid mobile-phone users to register with their providers.

While the regulation is not fool-proof, industry analysts broadly agree that requiring pre-registration will be one obstacle to terrorists when they use their phones for illicit activities that was not there before. In fact, even the Home Affairs Ministry Deputy Secretary for Security Choong May Ling acknowledged in the release that "there are overseas prepaid cards that can be used in Singapore. So the system that we are coming up with is not 100 percent foolproof."

"But I want to stress that it is a start, a necessary start and it will cover the majority of prepaid cards that are in use in Singapore. It would also make investigation simpler."

One immediate problem, however, is that the cost of implementing the regulation is likely to prove a significant burden to the private companies that must gather the information.

The Singaporean government has made no official estimate of just how much it will cost to introduce the new electronic system. But the bulk of the financial burden to implement the system will fall on the city-state's three major cellular providers, namely MobileOne, SingTel and StarHub, which will need to update their data systems in order to meet the demands. While the costs of upgrading are not clear, the penalties for failing to do so are. If the providers fail to provide the necessary information about their subscribers to government authorities, they could be fined or even have their licenses suspended or revoked.

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