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MOBILE PHONE SERVICES: INTERIM GOVT PLANS TO PROVIDE SIM CARDS TO ROHINGYAS

The Rohingyas, who have taken shelter in Bangladesh, have no legal means of obtaining SIM cards. However, many of them already possess SIMs from various Bangladeshi and Myanmar mobile operators. This has raised security concerns for the government.

In this context, the interim government is considering granting the Rohingya community legal access to SIM cards.

According to a source, a meeting with mobile operators on providing SIMs to Rohingyas was held earlier this month.

Fleeing persecution in Myanmar, Rohingyas took refuge in Bangladesh, where their population now exceeds 1.2 million. Although they have not been granted permission to use SIM cards, both Bangladeshi and Myanmar



SIMs are being used illegally in the camps. Reports suggest that the members of the Rohingya camp-based various armed groups commit criminal activities using Bangladeshi operators' SIMs illegally and Myanmar SIMs.

Taking the situation into consideration, in 2023, the then government had considered issuing SIM cards to Rohingyas through state-owned Teletalk, but the plan did not move forward. Now, the interim government is revisiting the idea. The Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) held discussions with

four mobile operators on the matter on Monday. According to BTRC and operator sources, Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus is scheduled to visit the Rohingya camps on 25 August. Discussions are under way to distribute some of the SIMs by that date.

Proposed method of SIM distribution
Under the current SIM sales policy, an applicant must provide an identity document and biometric verification. As Rohingyas do not possess such IDs, an alternative system is being considered.

It was proposed that mobile operators introduce a separate number series for Rohingyas. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) maintains a registration database, known as the "Progress ID", for each Rohingya. Those aged over 18 would be eligible for SIMs, which would be supplied

To page 2

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directly to UNHCR. Under the agreement with the government, the UNHCR database would be stored at the Bangladesh Computer Council's (BCC) data centre. However, transferring this database to the Bangladesh government is likely to take until November.

Since the government's target is August, discussions have focused on launching a pilot project under the Office of the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner to distribute 10,000 SIMs by 25 August.

Operators would offer three types of packages. Either the UNHCR or the government would bear the cost of the SIMs and packages. After issuing the new SIMs, the government would deactivate illegally used SIMs purchased with Bangladeshi national IDs.

Speaking about this, BTRC Chairman Maj. Gen. (retd) Emdadul Bari told Prothom Alo that the initiative is still at the discussion stage.

"Identification of camp residents is a key issue. Without ensuring this, SIM distribution cannot proceed. The matter is under discussion at the government level," he said.

What the operators say
Grameenphone Chief
Corporate Affairs Officer

(CCAO) Tanvir Mohammad welcomed the move.

He said, "We support the government's decision to legally sell SIMs in the Rohingya camps, which will give many people the opportunity to buy them through proper channels."

However, Shahed Alam, Chief Corporate and Regulatory Officer of Robi Axiata, voiced concerns.

"If the decision is taken for security reasons, the significant investment made by operators in this segment in SIM tax could become redundant," he pointed out.

Banglalink Head of Corporate Affairs Taimur Rahman urged that the registration process for Rohingya SIMs be simplified. "Extending mobile network coverage in this region will help maintain a healthy competitive environment," he remarked.

Technology policy adviser Abu Nazam Md Tanveer Hossain suggested designating the camps as a special zone.

"Myanmar's network is active there. For security reasons, the government should completely block external networks. Before issuing new SIMs, the old ones should be confiscated and documented," he advised the government.

Source: en.prothomalo.com

DR KHALILUR DISCUSSES ROHINGYA ISSUE WITH MALAYSIAN ENVOY ON MYANMAR

National Security Adviser and High Representative on the Rohingya Issue Dr Khalilur Rahman met ASEAN Chair's Special Envoy on Myanmar, Othman Hashim, on Wednesday at the Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Putrajaya.

Ambassador Hashim expressed deep appreciation for Bangladesh for its continued generosity towards the Rohingya community.

The two officials discussed recent developments in Myanmar, voicing serious concern over the worsening humanitarian situation in Rakhine State and the decline in international financial support for Rohingyas sheltered in Bangladesh.

They agreed to work closely towards an expeditious and sustainable resolution of the Rohingya crisis.

Dr Rahman briefed the Special Envoy on the upcoming stakeholders' dialogue on the Rohingya issue, scheduled to take place in Cox's Bazar on August 25.

Source: bssnews.net

NINE ROHINGYAS, INCLUDING WOMEN, CHILDREN DETAINED IN KATIGORAH WHILE ATTEMPTING TO RETURN TO BANGLADESH



Nine Rohingyas from Bangladesh, including women and children, were detained by locals on Tuesday evening (August 12) in Bishwambharpur, near the India–Bangladesh border in Katigorah, Cachar, while allegedly attempting to cross into Bangladesh through the international border. The detainees were later handed over to the Cachar Police.

According to sources, around 7 PM on Tuesday, residents spotted a group of unfamiliar people roaming in the area

and questioned them. Two of the detainees, identified as Shamsur Rahman and Abubakar Siddiqui, revealed they had entered India illegally with their parents 20–22 years ago and had since been living in Hyderabad, working in various occupations.

They reportedly decided to return to Bangladesh following the Indian government’s intensified crackdown on suspicious foreigners. The group travelled from Hyderabad to Hilara Station in Katigorah on

Tuesday morning, where they met a middleman who took them to Bishwambharpur. They were allegedly kept on a jungle-covered hillock for the entire day without food, forcing them to come out in the evening when children began crying from hunger.

When the locals saw them and, upon asking about their whereabouts, they were handed over to the police from Gumra Outpost. The detainees claimed to be Rohingya and said their families were in Bangladesh.

Source: barakbulletin.com