

8 MAR, 2011, 07.03AM IST, SHALINI SINGH,TNN

SIM cards new national security risk, warns MHA

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NEW DELHI: Did you ever imagine that your innocent looking mobile SIM card could be a major threat to national security? It now turns out that many of the SIM cards being used by nearly 700 million mobile users in the country may have malevolent embedded software, which has put India's security agencies on tenterhooks.

This new national security risk emerging out of the import of SIM cards, carrying embedded software for mobile phones, has alarmed the home ministry (MHA) and it intends to ask the telecom industry to replace all such imported SIMs in the country with locally manufactured ones at their own cost.

According to a government source, only 30% of the total volume of SIM cards are imported at present, though even this figure will now be subjected to a formal evaluation of installed capacity.

The fear is that the embedded software turns the SIM card into a minicomputer, which can be a cause of abuse. The MHA feels that although domestic telecom service providers personalize the SIMs, which reduces the risk, the security threat gets aggravated as telcos then provide the encryption keys to the manufacturing facility outside India, as part of standard trade practice.

The security agencies are proposing that only blank SIM cards be allowed for import and the personalization process be done entirely by domestic firms. Consultations are on with the DoT to establish the lead time required to create such capacity and indicate a specific time frame to the MHA.



However, since this can only reduce vulnerability of future imports, MHA wants the industry to replace all existing SIMs at its own cost. The MHA also wants the DoT to weed out all fake and duplicate IMEI numbers, indicating that its earlier crackdowns have not been entirely successful.

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