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Myanmar diverts special telecoms fund to biometrics database

Myanmar diverts special telecoms fund to biometrics database

[Thompson Chau](#) 11 Jun 2020



A person talking on his mobile phone walks past phone shops along Anawrahta Road in Kyauktada township, Yangon. Photo: The Myanmar Times

Myanmar diverts special telecoms fund to biometrics database

The Myanmar government plans to use a special telecoms fund to set up a biometrics database for mobile phone users despite concerns over the lack of privacy protection.

The tender for setting up and operating a biometrics SIM card database closed on June 9. The government's decision to tap the Universal Service Fund - intended by law to expand telecoms access - has raised objections by civil society activists who say it runs counter to the policy of the Ministry of Transport and Communication.

Under the new rules, people buying a SIM card will need to be fingerprinted and have their identity card scanned. The system has alarmed privacy and rights groups, especially because Myanmar does not have a data protection law or regulation.



[The biometrics database tender was first issued by the ministry's Posts and Telecommunications Department \(PTD\) in November 2019. It invited bids for a "national database to store and manage biometric mobile subscriber registration information from all mobile network operators".](#)

The ministry re-tendered the project in April and in mid-May extended the deadline to June 9.

In a written response to bidders released on May 15, the PTD says it "has no plan yet" to change the biometrics requirement from fingerprint recognition to eye or facial recognition.

Face photos "will not be used for matching" and only be stored as "biographic information", it says. Both left and right fingerprints shall be verified against the database to ensure no one is registering with a false identity.

The database shall be "implemented within six months" after a contract with the winning bidder is signed and the system must be able to store up to 60 million biometric records. The PTD also expects to finish re-registering "all customers" with biometrics within half a year once the database is set up.

[Meanwhile, millions of people in Myanmar risk having their phones permanently cut off from July 1 if the government presses ahead with its June 30 deadline for users to register their SIM cards with a valid identity document. Users are also to be restricted to two SIM cards from one operator.](#)

The ministry has not disclosed how it intends to spend the 2 percent levy on revenues collected from mobile operators in the Universal Service Fund to implement the database.

In an April 2020 notification, Communications Minister U Thant Sin Maung referred to Section 88(a) of the 2013 Telecoms Law as the legal basis for using the fund. But biometrics database information is not part of the PTD's Universal Service Strategy for Myanmar (2019-2023), which was adopted last December and made public in January 2020.

According to the strategy paper seen by *The Myanmar Times*, the fund is intended for developing infrastructure and digital literacy training programmes, connecting people in commercially non-viable areas and implementing projects for minorities, persons with disabilities and poor people. Biometrics projects are not included.

The 2013 Telecommunications Law says that the fund should be used for the universal service plans to expand telecom infrastructure and services in the underserved areas.

“The ministry is definitely using it outside of the scope of what the Universal Service Fund is traditionally used for,” commented Daw Htaike Htaike Aung, executive director of Myanmar ICT for Development Organisation (MIDO), a civil society organisation.

She said it opens the door to political interventions in the future and risks ineffective utilisation and management of the fund.

[Calling for the biometric database plans to be scrapped, London-based Privacy International has warned that it “would be operating in a legal void, as Myanmar has no data protection law or laws that regulate the use of surveillance.”](#)

The PTD previously said in response to Privacy International’s concerns that it is “preparing all the necessary Legal Framework for Biometric registration of SIM cards”.

The PTD has not responded to requests for comment by *The Myanmar Times*.

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