

India decrees smartphone makers must pre-install security app

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India's telecoms ministry has said that Apple and other smartphone makers must ensure new handsets come installed with a government cyber security app, raising concerns about privacy.

The ministry-developed app, called Sanchar Saathi, will have access to the phone's call log, memory and camera, according to the app's privacy statement.

Privacy advocates argued that the app risks giving the government more snooping powers in one of the world's largest mobile markets, with more than 700mn users.

The order could also put Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government in conflict with smartphone manufacturers and developers, including Apple and Google.

In an order issued last week and made public on Monday, the ministry demanded that manufacturers pre-install the app on phones for sale in India, which it said was intended to curb "misuse of telecom resources for cyber frauds and [ensure] telecom cyber security".

The means chosen to improve cyber security 'are legally fragile and hostile to user privacy'

"Manufacturers must ensure the app is easily accessible during device set-up, with no disabling or restriction of its features," the ministry said.

For mobile phones already in use, it wants the app, which can be used to track lost or stolen phones, to be installed through software updates within three months.

Apar Gupta, director of the Internet Freedom Foundation, an organisation promoting free speech online in India, said the directive "represents a sharp and deeply worrying expansion of executive control over personal digital devices".

He said that while the government's aim of checking smartphone fraud and improving telecom security was legitimate, "the means chosen are disproportionate, legally fragile and structurally hostile to user privacy and autonomy".

The government said last month that more than 700,000 lost smartphones had been found using the Sanchar Saathi app since it was launched for voluntary use at the start of this year.

Following criticism of the app, Jyotiraditya Scindia, communications minister, said it would allow users to protect their privacy and stay safe from online fraud. He said its use was "completely voluntary and democratic".

"Digital security of every citizen of the country is our topmost priority," he said in a post on X.

"Users may choose to activate the app and [enjoy] its benefits, or if they do not wish to, they can easily delete it from their phone at any time."

More than 85 per cent of Indian households own at least one smartphone, according to a government survey this year.