

India Orders Tracking App To Be Put in All Cellphones

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NEW DELHI — India's government sent a notice to private companies last week giving them 90 days to ensure that a government app was "preinstalled on all mobile handsets manufactured or imported for use in India."

The order said the requirement was meant "to identify and report acts that may endanger telecom cybersecurity." On Tuesday, the government explained that the app, Sanchar Saathi, was intended to prevent crime, including the theft and smuggling of phones and the call-center fraud that wreaks havoc within India and abroad.

Reuters had already reported the order's existence on Monday night, and copies were circulated online. Many people in India were in uproar, as were the political parties opposed to the tech-focused and strong-armed government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

"Sanchar Saathi is a snooping app," Priyanka Gandhi, a scion of the Congress Party and its general secretary, wrote on social media. "There's a very fine line between reporting fraud and seeing what every citizen of India is doing on their phone."

The app can track phone locations, and Ms. Gandhi and other critics of Mr. Modi regard it as a tool of mass surveillance.

By Tuesday afternoon, the government appeared to be backpedaling. Jyotiraditya Scindia, the minister of communications, said that while "this app exists to protect them from fraud and theft," it was also "completely optional."

"If you don't wish to register, you shouldn't register and can remove it at any time," he told reporters outside the Parliament building.

But Nikhil Pahwa, a digital policy analyst in New Delhi, said he was taking the government at its original word. The order said

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