

India's order for pre-installed state-owned phone app sparks surveillance fears

Sanjay Kumar New Delhi

India's plan to require smartphone makers to pre-install a state-owned cybersecurity app on new devices has sparked alarm, with main opposition and industry experts warning of potential breaches of information privacy.

The Ministry of Communications issued a directive over the weekend, according to which the Sanchar Saathi app must be visible and fully functional at first setup, with "no disabling or restriction of its features."

The pre-installation of the app — which is part of a government initiative to help mobile users track, block, and secure lost or stolen mobile devices — aims to safeguard Indian citizens from buying tampered devices and enable "easy reporting of



A man speaks on a mobile phone as he walks across a crowded market in Varanasi, India, on Oct. 25. AFP

suspected misuse of telecom resources," the ministry said in a statement on Monday, giving manufacturers 90 days to comply.

It also ordered them to "push the app to phones through software updates" to devices that are already in the market.

The announcement drew a backlash, with Congress, the main opposition party, demanding the rollback of the policy as unconstitutional.

"The right to privacy is an

intrinsic part of the fundamental right to life and liberty, enshrined in Article 21 of the Constitution. A pre-loaded government app that cannot be uninstalled is a dystopian tool to monitor every Indian," one of the party's leaders, K.C. Venugopal, said on X.

While the government said the app was needed to address "serious endangerment to telecom cyber security" from "duplicate or spoofed IMEI (international mobile equipment identity)" numbers, the Internet Freedom Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to defending digital rights in India, warned that it can convert every smartphone into a "vessel for state mandated software that the user cannot meaningfully refuse, control, or remove."