

Demystifying VoIP

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MAMOOD REZA

VOICE over Internet Protocol or VoIP is the name given to the technology that enables telephone calls over a computer network using Internet Protocol (IP). Since the proliferation of the Internet in the early 1990s, Internet Protocol (IP) has become the dominant protocol in computer networking. Today the Internet, which is a network of computers from all over the world, is the largest IP network in existence.

The acronym VoIP is very commonly used these days and it is also very misunderstood in certain parts of the world, especially so in Bangladesh. I felt compelled to put pen to paper after recently reading an article in a periodical published from Dhaka which described the status of VoIP in Bangladesh and BTTB's intentions in relation to managing it.

I was bemused to learn that BTTB is in the process of building a

common platform, at a cost of Tk 250 million in four areas of Bangladesh for routing Internet telephone calls, in the name of monitoring and safeguarding the security of the country. I am perplexed as to why such an expensive project needs to be undertaken for a struggling nation like Bangladesh at its taxpayers' expense. The Internet, though a creation of the US government and popularised by academics in its early days, only became a commercial success and a household name when it was allowed to grow organically.

Governments of many rich and resourceful countries and influential and powerful businessmen (including the world's richest man Bill Gates) have tried to control the Internet in some way and failed. If certain restrictions are placed on a connection via Internet, it's only a matter of time before intelligent computer professionals and users find another way to get the job done.

The Internet is public domain, it belongs to the users of the Internet right around the world and attempts by governments to control the Internet has so far proven unsuccessful. So why spend so much money on a project in the name of security?

Wouldn't this money be better spent improving the telecommunications infrastructure of our impoverished country? After all, we must fight terrorism as a social issue not a technology issue. If terrorism is truly being plotted using VoIP technology then the perpetrators will simply move on to another technology when VoIP is monitored or blocked.

Who are the real beneficiaries of VoIP?

In 1981 my father, while living in Australia, spent \$75 talking over the phone to my mother in Dhaka for 5 minutes. Back then as a student \$75 was almost a quarter of his monthly living allowance. I myself

spent \$50 for a 20-minute conversation with my mother in Dhaka while studying in Sydney in 1993. Today Bangladeshi students living in Australia can make a 20 minute phone call to Bangladesh for as little as \$1 using a phone card which utilises VoIP technology.

But let's look beyond the absolutely fantastic cost savings enjoyed by the Bangladeshis living abroad when it comes to ringing their loved ones in every nook and corner of Bangladesh on account of the blessings brought about by VoIP technology and mobile phones. Before the advent of phone cards and other means of cheap phone calls over the Internet, the enormous phone bills for international phone calls were payable to phone companies in the country where the phone call originated.

Admittedly, a percentage of the bill went towards BTTB's revenue as it completed the local leg of the international call. However, foreign phone companies were free to charge whatever rate they felt was appropriate for a small country like Bangladesh. And the majority of the hard earned money of the Bangladeshis overseas went into the pockets of some large national or multinational phone company outside Bangladesh.

By using phone cards or the VoIP technology this money is being channelled back into Bangladesh in the form of termination costs in Bangladesh. Therefore, the remittance of VoIP termination money into Bangladesh can become a very large source of highly sought after foreign currency for the government. So the beneficiaries are:

- Bangladeshis living abroad using VoIP
- VoIP operator abroad
- VoIP terminator in Bangladesh and
- Receivers of phone calls from near and dear ones living abroad sitting in any remote areas of the country.

In most cases all the parties above are Bangladeshis, therefore it's a clear case of Bangladeshis living overseas and in Bangladesh helping each other.

Where lies the problem?

More than two years after BRTC's announcement that it will award VoIP licenses in January 2004, nothing has happened. BTTB, reportedly, is citing two main reasons against the privatisation of VoIP:

- Government's inability to monitor VoIP calls
- BTTB's loss of revenue

I have already discussed the flaws in the concept of trying to

monitor all VoIP calls in and out of the country. In respect of BTTB's loss of revenue, in fact the solution is very simple and wouldn't cost BTTB or the government anything to set up. VoIP termination equipment has certain port capacity that allows it to terminate simultaneous phone calls accordingly.

BTTB, for example, can charge license fee of Tk 5,000 per port so that someone operating a 4-port gateway will pay Tk 20,000 as license fee per year. This will create a level playing field for all so that everyone, no matter how small or large, can enter the business and operate legally in their own right. An estimated 100,000 ports nationally would earn BTTB a revenue of Tk 500 million a year. BTTB can also run its own VoIP network if it wants to further increase its revenue. So BTTB's loss of revenue, to my assessment, is a misconception. It is simply a matter of earning that revenue through a different channel and, in my opinion, the sooner the licensing system is set up, the better it will be for BTTB.

What is the future?

Call terminators number in the several thousands across Bangladesh and that figure is growing. According to a report by an international telecom research

organization, in 2004 Bangladesh was the third fastest growing destination for international VoIP traffic. A Google search of "VoIP Termination" reveals the extent of the availability of VoIP terminators in Bangladesh. Clearly, young, intelligent, entrepreneurial and driven Bangladeshis are not prepared to sit back while the rest of the world moves forward.

I have been appalled by reports in Bangladeshi newspapers about raids and arrests of VoIP operators. Young and honest people with initiative are being treated like criminals, while powerful and corrupt businessmen are given full protection in our democracy because of their connections in high places.

For a country like Bangladesh it is vital that we as a nation empower our people. Our people and our youth are our greatest assets and we must provide them with tools for self-improvement and enlightenment. There are thousands, possibly millions, of unemployed youths in Bangladesh, mostly tertiary educated but unable to find suitable employment.

A voice termination business can provide these youths with an opportunity to be self-employed. It gives them hope and keeps them away from adding to the social problem of

unemployment and depression. It builds their technical skills and improves their communication abilities so that they can interact with people all around the world. International VoIP termination business for Bangladesh could be a viable solution to the unemployment problem, albeit, to some extent.

VoIP technology is enhancing the lives of Bangladeshis all around the world and creating opportunities for the youth of Bangladesh. Let's not ostracize the technology for misguided political reasons. True privatisation of VoIP will not only bring in lots of foreign currency into the country and empower its youth, it will also create other business opportunities and strengthen the IT industry in Bangladesh enormously. I urge the government of Bangladesh to look at the multitude of benefits privatisation of VoIP brings to the people of Bangladesh and to develop a scheme to issue licenses to terminators of all sizes around the country.

The author is a Bangladeshi who travelled to Australia in 1991 to study electrical engineering. He currently lives in Sydney, working as a network security engineer and operating a phone card business. He has been working with VoIP for 5 years.

Multi-polar world making a comeback?

America under President Bush is shunning the bravado of the years following 9/11 for active consultation with the other powers on containing Iran's nuclear ambition. One should commend here the discretion of President Clinton in exercising America's unchallenged supremacy in a uni-polar world. Even the Americans are proclaiming the end of the Bush Doctrine.

SYED MAQSUUD JAMIL

THE recently held G-8 Summit at St. Petersburg, Russia highlights a new world order: Russia is an equal partner of the exclusive club of very rich countries of the world. For Russia's traditional rivals among G-8 members, it is now a matter of engaging a partner not an adversary. The ideological divide is a thing of the past.

Russia has a functional democracy, an important criterion of membership. It is more a guided democracy under an authoritarian ruler in President Putin. There is obviously a question mark over Russia's democratic credentials. The G-8 members however find it convenient to recognise the economic consideration of Russia's growing strength as a resource rich and rapidly developing country. It has successfully restored its legitimate status as a global power.

The fall of the Soviet system has not diminished Russia. It has colonised its military might, ably

supported by an expanding economy to contend with the leaders of world economy. Since 1999, Russia's economy has grown by 6 percent, totalling a cumulative expansion of 65 percent. It is second only to Saudi Arabia in oil production and is the number one natural gas producer much ahead of second ranking Iran.

The vastness of Russia even without the former Soviet republics naturally endows the country with global importance. Besides, almost half a century of Soviet geo-political domination is an inheritance that makes the Russian Federation a natural heir to the continuity of the formidable role. But Russia's new role will be unlike the hegemony of the Soviet state. The world is not returning to one-to-one contest between the United States and Russia.

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United Kingdom has little practical scope of being an assertive global power and will instead opt for a policy based on consensus with United States. That leaves France and Germany in the European theatre. France has been able to build an assertive and independent role for her largely due to the statesmanship of Charles de Gaulle. President Jacques Chirac is a worthy successor of De Gaulle. He is actively voicing his support for a multi-polar world. In matters of spheres of influence, France with its Francophone countries is the other credible global power, although a lesser one, to engage the United States. Although most of the Francophone countries are poor and caught in conflict, they constitute a source of support for France at the Security Council.

G-8 is essentially an exclusive

club of the mighty. It is neither a pact nor an alliance. In fact, it is a club of the most developed and industrialised competing economies of the world having functional democracy. At the annual summit the G-8 leaders further increase their familiarity, listen to each other on different issues, form an opinion of the stand of the other side and also take part in serving a higher goal of helping the humanitarian cause of the least developed. Presumably, the very rich provide the most to suit their purpose.

For example, last year the spending was increased to \$100 billion from \$80 billion in 2004. And 80 percent of the increase went to Iraq, a country without a functional government, for construction efforts and debt relief. Aid agencies of the world fret about the tardy release of fund. In some cases, only one seventh of the fund for food arrived. It is the maintenance of geo-political equilibrium that draws the energies and attention of G-8.

In today's world, global leadership is all about dominating the resources of the world. For the United States the importance and urgency is greater. The theory of the clash of civilizations only cloaks the underlying issue. Oil and gas, the prime resources, are in the Middle East, the Central Asian Republics, and in Russia. It is to US advantage that oil and gas rich

emirates, kingdoms, one-man jumahria (democratic) of Libya and post-Saddam's Iraq faithfully follow its line.

Russia resents the presence of United States in Central Asia and this resentment is shared by China. Its base in Uzbekistan has been removed and the one in Kyrgyzstan is waiting to go under pressure from Russia and China. Economic recovery and political stability is adding to the growing assertive role of Russia. She is now using her levers of pressure in holding on to her spheres of influence in eastern Europe and in Baltic states. Ukraine with a 2063-kilometres long common border with Russia is feeling the pressure. Russia has increased the export price of gas by 40 percent to chastise Ukraine for her eagerness to join NATO. It is a signal of Russia's displeasure to other aspiring countries of former Soviet bloc.

On the other hand, Russia is building closer ties with China. Last year President Putin and his Chinese counterpart Hu Jintao met eight times to give an indication of the closer ties. They have taken a united stand against separatist tendencies in Chechnya, Tibet and Xinjiang province. Russia and China consult each other on common stand against the United States on Iran. They are wary of the activities of western environmental and NGO groups too.

Economic ties between the two countries are expanding vigorously. It has grown remarkably this year with two way trade in the first quarter registering a 50 percent rise from last year's \$29.1 billion. Armaments purchase by China has a significant place in this. Russia is also actively working on building economic ties with Japan and other Pacific region countries. The 4,100 kilometres long oil pipeline Russia is building through Siberia will end at Nakhodka on the Pacific coast so that oil could be sold to Japan, South Korea and other countries. China however wanted the new line to go directly into its territory.

Russia is benefitting much from large German investment in her economy. It is becoming the cornerstone of a special tie to the extent that a pipeline from Russia will go straight into Germany, bypassing Poland. The Christian Democratic government of Angela Merkel has reiterated the benefits of economic cooperation with Russia. Her government will continue to follow the policies of former Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder. The critics however liken it to Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of the Nazi period.

Whatever might be said, Germany has the credentials of a global power sans the military might. It is not much of a handicap in the ultimate analysis. Germany has what it needs for world leader-

ship, the bedrock of energy security and the benefits of extensive nature of resource development. Germany may not have the clout to dictate world decisions but neither will she be a second fiddle in matters of counsel. Unified Germany now has the stature of charting her own course, going her own way in matters of decision-making. It makes Germany another centre of global power of unobtrusive nature.

China is historically an eminent country of the world. It spreads over an area of 9,596,960 square kilometres, comparable to the United States. China is home to almost 130 crore people. The economic development of China over more than a decade is a wonder of the world. Almost all the indicators point towards the making of an economic giant. GDP growth consistently hovers around 10 percent taking its per capita GDP to \$5,000. It is ably supported by nominal population growth rate of 0.5 percent.

By any standard China is going through an economic boom of sustained nature. Even the rich members of G-8 have a stake in it with their business conglomerates courting China as an attractive business partner. However, its energy security is not as strong as Russia. The Russian alliance is therefore important for powering the dynamics of its economic growth. Militarily, China has the largest standing army with 200

million males of age group 15-49 fit for military service. China is a global superpower to watch in the present century.

President Hu Jintao's foreign visits show that China is giving full attention to its growing profile as a global power. In recent times, the Chinese leaders have become globetrotters visiting countries of different parts of the world. They are warming up to India and have recently opened a land transit point at the north eastern India-China border. China is taking its role seriously as demonstrated by its active participation in efforts to contain Iran and North Korea's nuclear arms development issue.

The world in 2006 is no longer America's to take. America's capacity is now a fact. Bush doctrine is plodding. Pullout from Iraq looks even more intractable with the majority Shiites reacting to Israel's disproportionate onslaught against their Hizbollah brethren in Lebanon. The bloodletting in Iraq continues, taking American lives as well. The Afghan impasse has no end in sight. America is unsure about what to do in defusing the Gaza firework. President Bush, as seen in his camaraderie at St. Petersburg, is more than willing to talk and to listen to what the leaders on the other side have to say.

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Character assassination

The Corruption Data Base-2005 report published recently adjudged the local government and rural development sector (under the LGRD ministry) as number one in respect of corruption. This report was stated to have been based on numerous stories of corruption, published over the year, in different newspapers. It may be pertinent to note here that no full length (or even partial) rejoinder, as in the present case with TIB, was ever given by the LGRD Ministry at the time.

KAZI ALAUDDIN AHMED

SCANDALISING a person like Prof Muzaffar Ahmed is, in my opinion, akin to purposeful strangulation of the voice of a die-hard protagonist of ethical values in Bangladesh. The LGRD Minister, Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, cast some absolutely unfounded aspersions against such a pious person in a hurriedly called press conference to challenge the Transparency International, Bangladesh, report on corruption in his ministry.

Prof Ahmed being the Trustee Chairman of TIB was the target of the enraged minister. Undenially, it was never expected of a person of Mr. Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan's stature to resort to personal vilification of Prof Ahmed. By the courtesy of the electronic media the viewers across the country had direct experience, early this month, of the furious reaction of the minister while talking to the press. In the meeting Mr. Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan was unusually enraged, asking for an explanation from the TIB representative about the "false report." The gentleman looked lost and was unable to reply to the heated queries of the minister.

Notwithstanding the import of the TIB produced "Corruption Data Base-2005" it was good to see something very rare indeed, the boss of a ministry assuming personal responsibility to defend his subordinates in the ministry. From the management point of view it was a real good gesture. Yet, the beauty of such a benign gesture was unfortunately lost in his emotional outburst that made unfair remarks on the personal character of a highly respected person. Thank

God that Prof Ahmed, with his usual simplicity, opted not to represent TIB in the minister's press conference.

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Belated though, this time the minister in charge has expressed his reaction, claiming the TIB report to be "untrue, baseless, misleading and motivated." On the other hand, the chairman of TIB, Professor Muzaffar Ahmed, replied that the report had not been based on mere imagination, or concocted information, and that it had been entirely based on the reports/information/data published in the national dailies.

Since the LGRD ministry didn't protest at the appropriate moment, the veracity of the press reports has been proved beyond much doubt. And since TIB had alluded to the press reports, the LGRD minister could sue the reporting newspapers in a court of law.

Threatening TIB at this hour sounds preposterous. In either case, the matter, if it is really taken to the court by the affected ministry(ies), will afford an opportunity to the people at large to know for certain whether the press reports are true or false. If they turn out to be false, the reporting journalists and their

employers will have to face legal consequences. And if they are found to be true it will be one of a very few examples of corruption being legally established.

As such, it may be right for LGRD ministry to go for legal action/contest the charges of corruption in the court for the purpose of clarity and integrity. It will also afford the court an opportunity to look into the unfounded castigations against an honest person like Prof Ahmed.

The unfortunate heat generated by a minister over the issue was about to subside when two journalists started to pester Prof Ahmed with some questions at his press conference which, most surprisingly, echoed the LGRD minister. The funniest question put by one of these two, branded by some of their fellow journalist as "cadre pressmen," was a query asking Prof Ahmed if he really believed in all the reports that "we journalists/pressmen give out in newspaper." It was considered by all others present as a sinister attempt at disproving the reports based on which TIB brought out their Corruption Data Base-2005 early this month.

To the Election Commission scenario again. The CEC was seen in the electronic media contesting a verbal duel with the Finance Minister M. Saifur Rahman on the financing of the voter-list updating. Justice Aziz emphatically claimed that the Election Commission was not subservient to any individual, and that the government was "bound" to provide the required fund for the operation of the Election Commission.

The Finance Minister, on the other hand, told the viewers that unless he

received the statement of expenditures against funds provided earlier to EC, he was not in a position to provide additional funds now. Viewed together, the two statements appeared to have been born of a "behind the curtain understanding" to convey to the people, and to the opposition political parties, that the government leaders were not, in any manner, siding with the CEC. It continues to be treated as an unwholesome bluff to contain the ever-brewing commotion against the CEC.

Intriguingly fond of boasting about his constitutional position, the CEC, in his latest deliberation, stated that he was not at all concerned about the demand of civil society, Supreme Court Bar Association office-bearers and the elite, for his immediate resignation. He retorted instead that a group of people was out to damage the "image" of the country, to create chaos and confusion and to deliberately disturb the process of election now in progress.

In the end, he challenged that the election would be held in 2007 under his leadership of the Election Commission and that none would be able to stop it. Such expressed conviction on the part of the CEC smells strangely political, very much synchronising with the tone of the present government leaders. Taking all these together, things continue to be extremely muddled and chaotic and might precipitate a severe crisis. In consequence, it is feared that the whole nation will soon reach a point of no return.

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Middle East crisis deepens further

The General Assembly may come forward to adopt a resolution to cancel the membership of Israel in the world body for its flouting of UN resolutions. Since there is no veto power, the General Assembly could initiate such action to punish Israel in the interest of peace in the Middle East. As soon as Israel vacates the occupied Arab territories, on the basis of UN resolutions 242 and 338, peace will prevail in the Middle East. It would be worthwhile to post international peacekeeping forces in Lebanon, and Palestinian areas as well, to monitor the developments till stability returns to the region.

MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

THE killing of four UN staff at UN observation post in Southern Lebanon, by Israeli air strikes on July 25 has further complicated the fluid situation in war-torn Lebanon. Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations, has suggested the strike was deliberate. Although the Israeli ambassador to the United Nations protested the statement, Israel, however, regretted the killing.

It cannot be ruled out that the strike was deliberate because of the timing. This strike took place at a time when the UN and European Union were determined to send a strong UN peacekeeping force, comprising of European, Arab, and Turkish troops. The decision in this connection was about to be taken at the Rome Conference on July 26.

The targeting of the UN observation post at Southern Lebanon was to create concern among prospective participating countries in peacekeeping in Lebanon. Under international law, the blue helmet force is protected from any kind of attack. Israel has intentionally created a situation that would influence other countries not to send troops under UN supervi-

sion. This is not the first time Israel has not been inclined to accept international peacekeeping forces in the region. In this connection, I would like to recall that the Secretary General wanted to send a UN observer team to occupied Arab territories in 2002 following massacres carried out by Israeli troops of innocent Palestinians, but Israel refused to accept. The Secretary General's decision was based on the report by his envoy who described the devastation in Jenin in particular, horrible beyond belief. He was on record as saying that the Jewish state had been "morally repugnant."

This is the second time in two weeks that Kofi Annan has come out with a strong statement against Israel. It appears that the Secretary General's reaction is the result of frustration in handling a humanitarian crisis of unprecedented nature in Lebanon which was the result of indiscriminate bombardment and artillery shelling of Beirut, Tyre, Sidon, airport, and highways in the name of punishing Hezbollah.

More than one thousand Lebanese have become victim of insane Israeli action. In comparison to this figure there were hardly 30 Israelis either dead, or

wounded, because of the firing of rockets by Hezbollah into Israeli territories. It gives a clear picture of disproportionate Israeli action in Lebanon.

Lebanon, which has been described as the Switzerland of the east has been a target of Israeli aggression since 1975. This is the fourth time Lebanon was attacked by Israel. Israel vacated Lebanon in 2000 following UN resolution. 55 UN resolutions were adopted against Israel on the Middle East issue. Syria was another country which occupied Lebanon for 29 years until she vacated last year on the basis of a joint resolution by France and United States.

The fact is that Israeli troops had crossed the Lebanon border on July 12 in the south which is under control of Hezbollah guerrillas. Hezbollah did not lose time and destroyed an Israeli tank, killed two soldiers and captured two of them. The American media twisted the fact. But Israel is the aggressor.

Israel has been condemned four times by the Security Council in the past for attacking Lebanon. As of now Israel had flouted the UN resolutions. These resolutions were not binding as they were adopted under chapter six of the

UN charter. The Security Council, therefore, should consider adopting strong resolution under chapter seven of the charter to drive out Israel from Lebanon and occupied Arab lands. All members of the Security Council should be united to adopt this resolution in spite of the fact that it would be torpedoed by the United States to protect Israel.

It is high time that an international conference, which was floated by Russian President Putin, be organised by OIC, or Arab League, to take stern action against Israel which is on record as a violator of UN resolutions time and again.

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The Bush administration should understand the underlying trend in the politics of Israel and the Jewish lobby in Washington to bring about just and fair play in resolving the conflict. As a superpower the United States should demonstrate magnanimity, sagacity and dynamism to play as good broker to bring justice in the region.

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