Cut Off

The government's short-sighted decision to demolish illegal VoIPs (Voice over Internet Protocol) without fulfilling its promise to award licenses for legitimate businesses has left hundreds of thousands of NRBs (Non-resident Bangladeshis) unable to get in touch with their loved ones and is also set to cost the business sector dear because of its cumbersome state-regulated communication technology.

HANA SHAMS AHMED

Mahmudul Hassan, a Project Manager for Hewlett Packard has been living in the USA for more than seven years. He's the eldest of three siblings and all the rest of his family members live in Mirpur. In the last two weeks none of his calls have been getting through even when he tried to call direct. He was very surprised by the government's decision to stop VoIP services in the country without giving licenses so that they could be provided legally. "My sister just had a baby," says Hassan, "I did not get to congratulate her or hear my nephew's voice. I have not been able to get hold of my parents at all and I'm really upset that I missed talking to my dad on his birthday." In the last few years as technology has become cheaper he has been calling his family in Dhaka regularly. Now after a long time Hassan feels homesick again.

And that is the case for the more than five million Bangladeshis living in different parts of the world. VoIP or Internet telephony uses a combination of hardware and software to transmit telephone calls through the Internet. The signal travels from a person's phone to the Internet where it crosses borders and is eventually transmitted back to a phone in another country. The signal that travels through the Internet is free which makes the phone call so cheap. Closing down the VoIP centres in Bangladesh means that they disconnected these computers in Dhaka and so the calls cannot "terminate" here anymore. While the process of terminating has deprived BTTB of a large amount of revenue and allowed many unscrupulous individuals to carry on illegal monopolies in the business for years, the ultimate sufferers are the Bangladeshi expatriates for whom a phone call to a loved one back home is the only way to make their homesickness bearable.

Thirty-four-year-old Rubel Ahsan has been working in the IT industry in Silicon Valley, California for the last 10 years. He recently went back from Bangladesh and was really surprised when he could not call back home to let anyone know of their safe arrival. "After having left our family back home, you can imagine how much we wanted to talk to them," he says, "On top of that we had mistakenly left an important medication in Bangladesh and needed to ask them to send it with someone right away who was coming the next day. In the end, we had to call someone in another country and had them SMS the message to Dhaka. However, it was too late and the medication had to be sent by FedEx."

Ahsan is very frustrated with the government's decision. "In the progressive world, that (VoIP) is completely in the private sector," he says, "The U.S Government does not own any phone companies like Bangladesh government owns the BTTB. It's completely deregulated. They pay their taxes to the government like any other business. In Bangladesh, that is how it was meant to be as well. However, powerful people did not want regular joes like us to get into the act so they kept it illegal."

There are allegations that the BNP government's procrastination in legalising the business by giving licenses allowed many influential quarters within the government and outside it, to make huge amounts of money through a business that was completely illegal.

The commercial use of VoIP was approved by the then Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia at the end of 2003, after two years of lobbying and severe criticism from information technology and telecom experts. The chairman of BTRC (Bangladesh Telecom Regulatory Commission), Syed Marghub Morshed, was quoted by the BBC then that licences would be awarded as early as possible as 'technological advancement should no longer be held back'.