But the government move to grant licenses to these companies never came. In December 2005 the government declared that licence for VoIP would be given after setting up a common platform in four areas of the country bye June of the following year under BTTB in Dhaka, Chittagong, Sylhet and Bogra. That deadline too passed by. In the meantime the number of illegal VoIPs grew but the government didn't seem to take much heed. ISPAB (Internet Service Providers Association of Bangladesh) President Akhtaruzzaman Manju's recommendation that legalising the system would allow the country to earn Tk 1,000 crore as foreign exchange fell on deaf ears. 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.


Lonely parents of NRBs live on phone calls from their children and grandchildren.

The caretaker government's decision to stop VoIP services without thinking of the consequences and without any backup plan has left hundreds of thousands of NRBs in a quandary. 38-year-old Rumi Ahmed Khan, a physician and an assistant professor at the Medical College of Wisconsin points out that as more and more people travel to the Middle East and other countries from rural areas with no BTTB connection the absence of VoIP calls will create a huge communication gap between families from these middle and lower-income group. "Since VoIP started to be used in Bangladesh, calling has become dramatically easier and cheaper," he says, "As more and more parents, wives and children are left behind in Bangladesh, overseas calls from children or head of family has become more crucial in the daily lives of millions of Bangladeshis. With nearly everybody in middle class having a cell phone, there is a trend towards communicating overseas via phones rather using old hand-written mails. As most NRBs are from poor rural societies, they even don't have a landline in a ten-mile radius. And among the few landline owners, fewer have ISD established in the phone. So an extremely small portion of people is under the coverage of non-VoIP telecommunication. Without VoIP these people will be totally disconnected."

According to GSMA (Global System for Mobile communication Association), a grouping of more than 700 GSM mobile phone operators from 217 countries, telecommunications investment as a percentage of GDP is 70% lower in Bangladesh and call prices are two to three times higher than the average for developing countries, which puts Bangladesh-based businesses, competing in the global market, at a competitive disadvantage because the cost of communicating is substantially higher.

Tanoy Kanti Dutta, the Chief Operating officer of Techno Dimension Pte Ltd., a registered SBO (Service Based Operator) is very critical of the past government's inaction to set up an organised VoIP system. He is shocked that VoIPs were closed in Bangladesh because BTTB was losing revenue. "It seems from the very next day Rab is going to start arresting everyone for sending Emails because the post office is losing revenue," says Dutta, "When I was in Bangladesh even for one residential line you had to pay a bribe to the half-educated lineman after paying for the demand note. Has the caretaker government taken any steps to clean up the BTTB system?"

Dutta, who has three years experience in the telecom sector, believes that Bangladesh has huge possibilities in the telecom sector. "Every day companies like Sing Tel, MCI, Sprint, Vsnl have billions of voice minutes for Bangladesh. Our NRBs send lots of remittance to the country. They have the right to communicate with their relatives at a reasonable rate," he says, "This is the right time to liberalise the VOIP. The people who have been arrested should be utilised for the development of this sector. VOIP is a technology. It is a golden mine for Bangladesh."

So, where does all this leave Bangladesh? Apart from lost business opportunities and foreign investment, it leaves a lot of NRBs, who send an enormous amount of remittance every year, with a huge communication gap with their families. While the whole world moves ahead in leaps and bounds in the technological sector because of the past government's vested interest to help its cronies make a fortune on illegal businesses, VoIP license applications from authorised ISPs have been kept on hold indefinitely. Meanwhile we wait anxiously for the caretaker government's steps to bridge the gap between the country and the rest of the world. ■