

Underground cell markets flourish

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A shady trade of cellular phones is on the rise in the capital where cell phones are available at a bargain price.

Cell phones from different sources -- mugged by crooks or seized by customs officials -- usually end up at Islampur Market in Gulistan or with hustlers working in the vicinity of Gabtoli bus terminal, Bangabandhu National Stadium and Baitul Mokarram National Mosque. Bootlegged and improperly refurbished ones are also sold at these places.

The illegal cell phone business is run by an organised cartel and each cell phone usually changes hands multiple times. Stolen or mugged cell phones can even be retrieved from these places with 'right connections,' said sources.

Rehan Mahmud, an undergraduate BBA student at a private university, found his mugged expensive Nokia N90 cellular phone at one of these markets. He wound up repurchasing his phone.

Mahmud's phone was mugged from him last month when he was on his way home from a friend's place at Mohammadpur. Mahmud went to a local cellular phone shop in Uttara next morning and told the shop attendant about the mugging incident. To his surprise, the shop attendant was unusually curious about specific details of the incident.

"He asked me a lot of specific questions about the incident -- especially the specific time and exact location of the incident," said Mahmud.

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"After hearing me out, the attendant told me that there was still a possibility that I might get my handset back, but only if I'm willing to pay for it," he added.

Next day, Mahmud managed to buy back his phone for Tk 6,000 from a street hustler at the Islampur Market in Gulistan. "He (the hustler) offered me a 'big discount' on the phone since it was mugged from me," said Mahmud.

Nazmul Hossain (not his real name), a stall owner near the Bangabandhu National Stadium, told this correspondent that the hustlers have connections with certain

groups of people living in slums located around their place of operation and "they hide the mugged phones in the slums."

According to Hossain, these gangs have ties with local cell phone repair shops where the stolen phones are given the looks of new ones.

"Once the work is done, the phones are usually taken to various selling points at different locations. Usually, the traders hang out near CD or DVD outlets in a market and sell the goods outside," said Nazmul.

Nazmul further added that these traders are usually seen in the act from 11:00 am to

2:00pm near the markets.

Purchasing a cell phone from these hustlers is really tricky as the traders do not deal expensive stolen handsets with just anyone. Before offering anything, they usually ask many questions to be sure of the buyer's intention.

"They are very careful and picky about their customers and they tend to choose the ones who are willing to pay high prices and would not bother them later on," said Jalil Ahmed, a trader of second-hand cell phones.

"Rather than approaching the customers themselves, they wait for the customers to approach them. After making



sure that the customers can offer a good price, they display their booty. If they feel that the person is safe to deal with, they ask the customer about the budget and preferences," Jalil added.

According to Jamal Hossain, owner of a telecom shop at Uttara, the underground cell phone market has become a huge business in the city where traders are swindling people out of money by selling cheaply

bootlegged, and malfunctioning cell phones that are given new looks.

"Stolen and malfunctioning cell phones are being tampered with by technicians and are sold there. These phones hardly last for more than six months," said Hossain.

According to shopkeepers, a large number of the high-grade cellular phone sets sold at these markets are collected from customs officials.

Jahurullah, owner of a telecom store in the Islampur market, admitted to this correspondent that they receive a lot of cell phones from customs officials.

"The customs warehouse stores a huge number of cell phones that had been seized by customs officials. These cell phones later are sold to the illegal cell phone cartel who eventually sell these to us," Jahurullah added.

Moktar Ali, a trader of sec-

ond-hand cell phones operating near the Baitul Mokarram National Mosque, told this correspondent that the phones do not cost more than Tk 2,000.

"We offer cell phones at a cheaper price for the people who otherwise couldn't afford to own pricey phones. This is what drives hundreds of people to flock to these markets looking for a good deal" said Ali.

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