



BUSINESS

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GP users suffer in northern districts

Troubles stem from Indian radio communication source: BTRC

MUHAMMAD ZAHIDUL ISLAM

Grameenphone customers in nine border districts in the north have been facing frequent call drops for the last two years due to cross-border interference by radio communication equipment in India, according to the operator and the telecom regulator.

A team of experts from the regulator and the operator visited the affected areas in December last year and identified an antenna apparently used by India's security forces in Siliguri as a probable cause of the interference.

Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission raised the issue at a meeting with Indian High Commissioner Harsh Vardhan Shringla in Dhaka yesterday.

Bangladesh will send an expert team to India by June after further discussions with the Indian High Commission in Dhaka, Shahjahan Mahmood, chairman of BTRC, told The Daily Star.

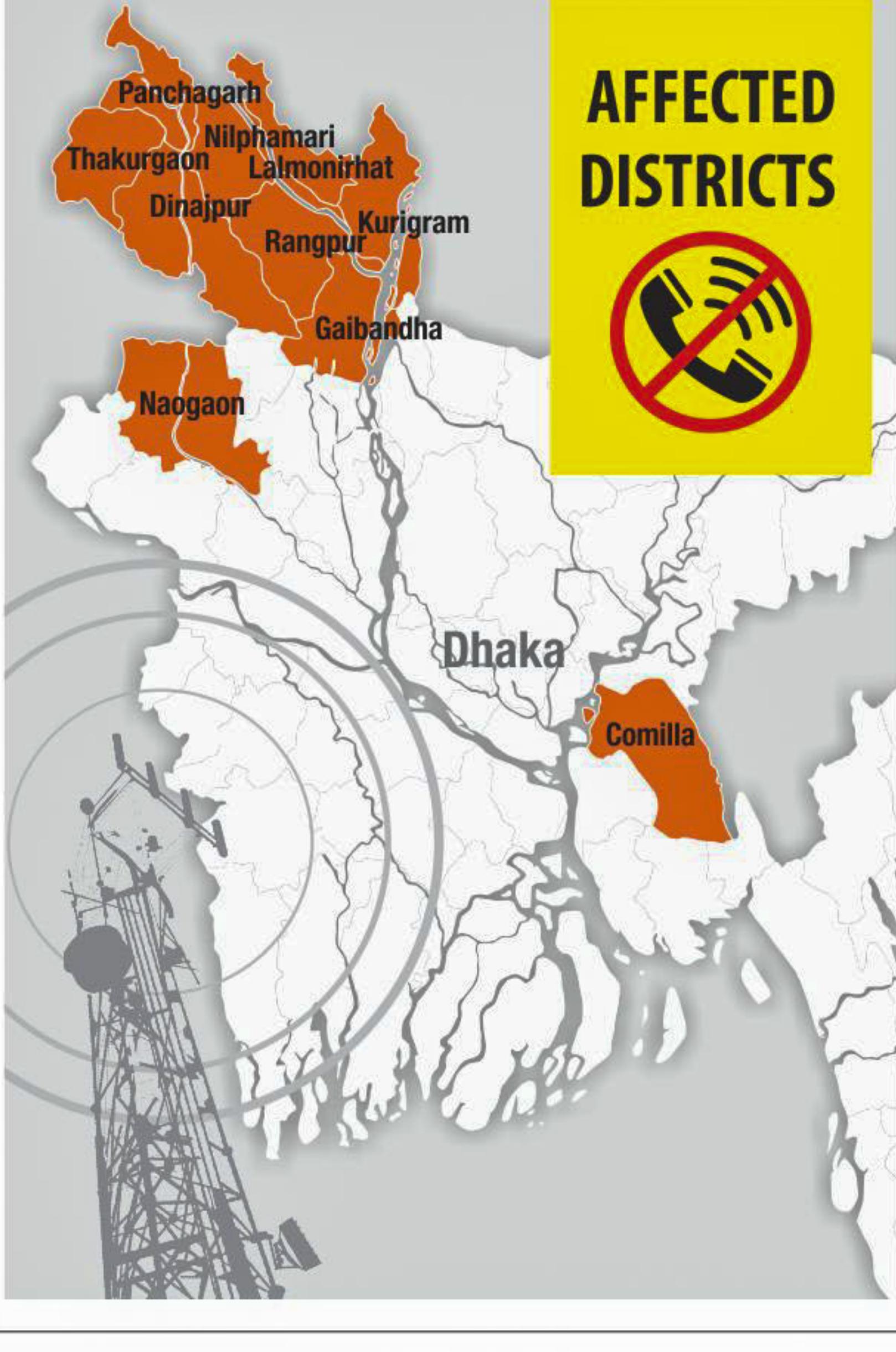
It is necessary to discuss the issue at the national level, BTRC wrote in a letter to the telecom division earlier.

For its part, the telecom division has written to the foreign ministry, urging it to open talks with India.

Users, especially of 3G services, suffer due to the interference, Mahmood said. "It is also the regulator's responsibility."

The nine districts where service disruptions were reported are: Rangpur, Kurigram, Nilphamari, Gaibandha, Panchagarh, Thakurgaon, Dinajpur, Lalmonirhat and Naogaon.

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Govt plans to hike farm subsidy

Shykh Seraj submits recommendations for agriculture budget to Muhith

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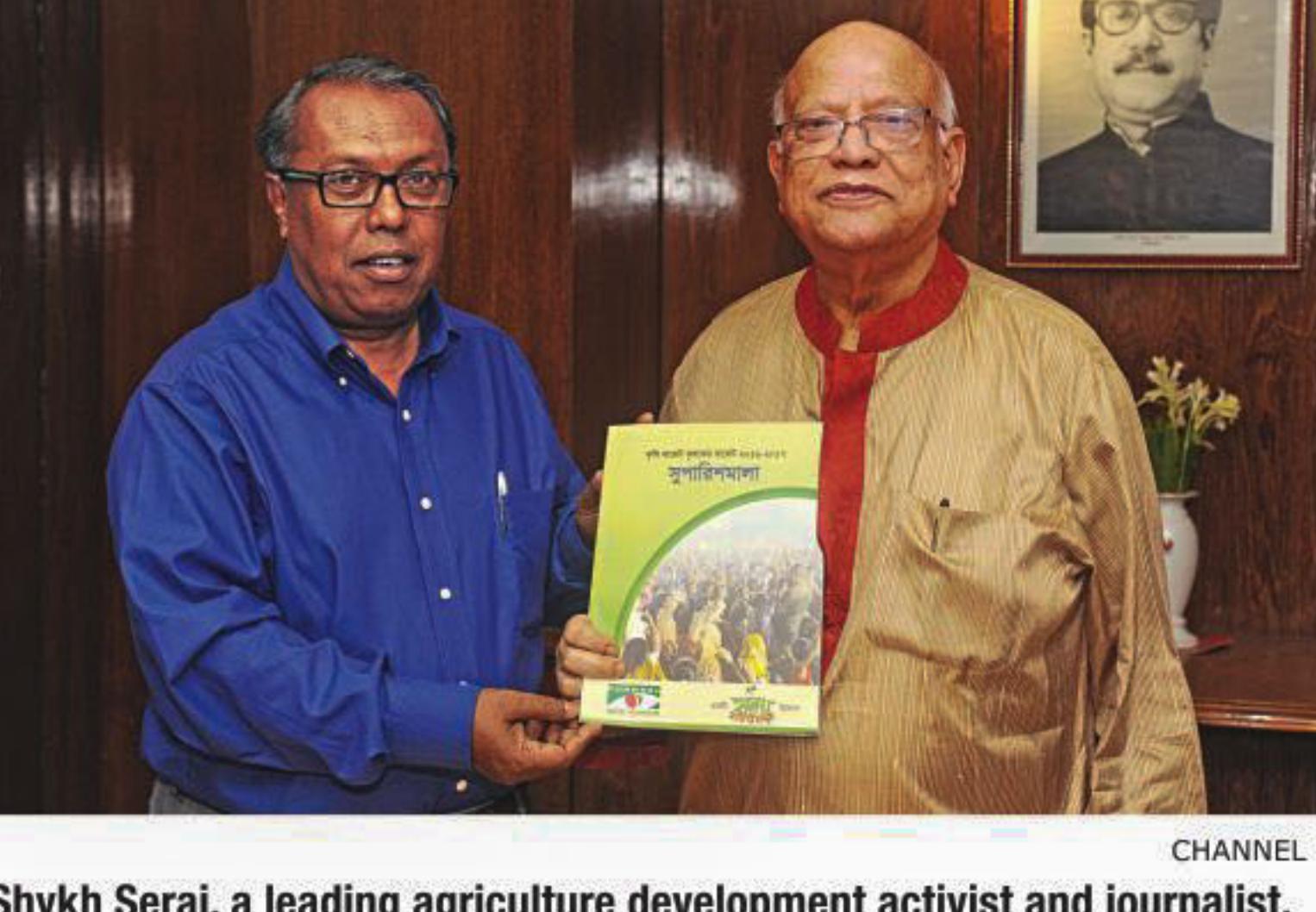
The government may increase agriculture subsidy in the next fiscal year, as farmers are not getting fair prices for their produce, Finance Minister AMA Muhith said yesterday.

"I think we have to give more subsidy to the farm sector as prices of the produce have fallen in the local markets due to a surplus in output," Muhith said in a meeting with Shykh Seraj, a leading agriculture development activist and journalist, at the minister's secretariat office in Dhaka.

Seraj, also the director and head of news at private television Channel i, submitted a set of recommendations to the minister after a campaign for agriculture budget and welfare of the farmers.

"If the farmers do not get proper prices, they might be discouraged in future. So, we will continue the subsidy and we might increase the amount in the next fiscal year to help farmers," Muhith said.

Increasing farm subsidy this time is a surprising matter for me, as the government had earlier given subsidy to the agricultural sector for a deficit in food production. But now we are giving the subsidy to ensure proper prices for the farmers



Shykh Seraj, a leading agriculture development activist and journalist, submits recommendations for agriculture budget to AMA Muhith, finance minister, at the minister's secretariat office in Dhaka yesterday.

for a surplus in food production."

However, the minister did not mention the extent to which the subsidy will be increased.

The government would provide subsidy for the farm sector so that the farmers can purchase fertilisers and farm machinery, and use the subsidised money for irrigation.

Muhith said the government might also start purchasing maize from the farmers as its cultivation is

gaining popularity in Bangladesh.

Maize has a very big market worldwide, but in Bangladesh, farmers do not get fair prices for low demand.

On the disbursement of farm loans, the minister said he will ask Krishi Bank, a state-owned bank for the farmers, to supply a list of loan recipients to the ministry every month, so that the middlemen cannot cheat the farmers.

In his proposals, Seraj urged the government to facilitate the farmers in using different apps, so that they can get timely information on farming and marketing of goods for proper prices.

Seraj also proposed the government provide subsidies to the poultry farmers as they have been struggling to sustain after losses from bird flu a few years ago.

The number of poultry farms across the country declined to about 80,000 from more than 1.5 lakh a few years ago, due to a lack of financial support from the government, Seraj added.

Seraj urged the government to give higher subsidy to the fisheries sector to boost production.

Seraj asked the government to strengthen the activities of the state owned Bangladesh Livestock Research Institute (BLRI), which is responsible for producing improved varieties of cows.

The performance of BLRI is poor, although the government has been spending hefty sums of money on this institute every year, he said.

Earlier, Seraj and his team held meetings with farmers in six districts to prepare the budgetary proposals. This is the 11th time that he has placed the budgetary proposals for this sector.

Levy higher taxes on tobacco: campaigners

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Anti-tobacco campaigners yesterday demanded higher taxes on tobacco products to reduce its consumption and health risks.

"We must prevent tobacco consumption. Otherwise, we will become a crippled nation," said Abdul Malik, founder of National Heart Foundation of Bangladesh.

Tobacco is a major contributor to cancer, lung and heart diseases, but the tobacco companies are still growing their businesses by influencing the tax and finance authorities, said Malik.

The observations came at a press briefing at the National Press Club ahead of the budget for the next fiscal year that will be proposed in parliament next week.

The government plans to hike taxes on tobacco products, including cheap cigarettes in fiscal 2016-17. The price slab for a 10-stick pack of cigarettes may be raised to Tk 22 from Tk 18 now. Supplementary duty may also see a 2 percentage-point increase to 50 percent.

The government's earnings from tobacco account for 50 percent of what it spends for diseases caused by tobacco consumption, according to the World Health Organisation.

"Yet, tobacco prices are getting cheaper in Bangladesh," Nadira Kiran, co-convenor of Anti-Tobacco Media Alliance or ATMA, said in her keynote speech.

The prices of 5,000 tobacco sticks in

2008-09 were 1.82 percent of the per capita GDP, which went down to 1.34 percent in 2013-14, she said citing data from the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids.

Tobacco products are cheaper than daily essentials in real terms – something that inspires more tobacco consumption, she added.

According to the Global Adult Tobacco Survey, 4.13 crore adult people in Bangladesh consume tobacco. Besides, 7 percent of adolescents aged between 13 and 15 consume tobacco.

One lakh people die of tobacco-related diseases in Bangladesh a year, according to the US-based Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation.

Despite such harmful impacts, authorities are not serious enough to impose higher taxes on it, partly because of lobbying of the tobacco companies, the activists said.

Mahfuzur Rahman Bhuiyan, grant manager of CTFK, said the existing tax-structure in Bangladesh is quite complex. For example, there are price levels for cigarettes, tariff value for bidi and ex-factory prices for gul-zarda (smokeless tobacco).

"Taking advantage of such variations, tobacco companies dodge tax."

The anti-tobacco campaigners demanded imposing 70 percent excise tax on the retail price of all types of cigarettes and non-smoking gul and zarda, 40 percent excise tax on bidis and increasing the export duty from 10 percent to 25 percent.

WB gives \$176m for agriculture

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The World Bank will provide \$176 million in low-cost loans to Bangladesh to help the country increase its agricultural productivity and create access to markets for more than one million poor farmers, particularly women.

The multilateral lender yesterday signed a financing agreement to this effect at the Economic Relations Division in Dhaka under the Second National Agricultural Technology Programme.

The scheme will help increase and diversify productivity of crops, live-stock and fisheries, and enhance poor farmers' access to markets. The project

will also enhance nutrition by ensuring food safety and more diversified food consumption.

By emphasising demand-driven research and modern agricultural technology, the project will increase farm yields and adaptation to climate change, the WB said in a statement.

"Building on the success of earlier World Bank support, this project will help achieve food security, improve resilience to climate change, and enhance nutrition through safer and more diversified food," said Qimiao Fan, country director of the WB for Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal.

"Bangladesh has done remarkably well in improving agricultural productivity and food security.

With more than 40 percent of the total workforce engaged in agriculture, the sector plays an important role in the country's growth and development."

The project will be implemented in 57 districts where it will benefit small-scale farmers through stronger linkages with research, agricultural extension services, farmer groups, and on-farm demonstrations to promote improved agricultural technologies. The project will focus on training for farmers and agricultural extension field staff to ensure knowledge sharing and technology transfer.

Fan and ERD Senior Secretary Mohammad Mejbahuddin signed the agreement.

The scheme will help increase and diversify productivity of crops, live-stock and fisheries, and enhance poor farmers' access to markets. The project

SWIFT says it cannot secure customers' networks

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Global financial messaging network SWIFT says it cannot secure customers' environments where its tools and software are used.

In Bangladesh and other cases, the thieves compromised the IT environment and worked their way to the banking systems where the SWIFT instructions were generated and the confirmations received, said Gottfried Leibbrandt, chief executive of SWIFT.

"We cannot secure our customers' environments and cannot assume responsibility for that," he said in his keynote speech at the 14th annual

European Financial Services Conference in Brussels yesterday.

The recent fraud at Bangladesh has caught multiple headlines and will prove to be a watershed event for the banking industry, he said.

"The Bangladesh fraud is not an isolated incident: we are aware of at least two, but possibly more, other cases where fraudsters used the same modus operandi, albeit without the spectacular amounts," Leibbrandt said.

"The banks were compromised, credentials to payment generation systems were obtained to send fraudulent payments and the statements/confirmations from their

counterparties were obfuscated," he said.

"So this is a big deal. And it gets to the heart of banking."

Keeping money secure is core business for banks. "So these events are a problem on at least two fronts."

First, it is a problem because banks that are compromised like this can be put out of business, he said.

"It's not like retailers losing credit card details or telcos losing customer details. Telcos and retailers will take reputational hits, and may face some financial liabilities, but things will move on."

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