Mobile operators in Bangladesh have long wanted to sell 4G-enabled handsets in cooperation with manufacturers on instalments. The photo was taken from Chattogram city on Tuesday.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

Mobile operators' handsets now in instalments

A SIM will be locked with the set until payment is cleared

MAHMUDUL HASAN

Customers now can avail handsets in instalments when purchasing connections as the telecom regulator has finally decided to give the greenlight to mobile network operators in this regard.

The phone will have to have at least two or more SIM slots. One of these slots will be dedicated for the SIM of the operator selling the phone and it would be locked to that specific operator.

In the other slots, customers have the freedom to use SIM cards from any operator of their choice, without any restriction, according to a document of Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC).

Customers will have to pay a down payment of 20 per cent to 40 per cent of the price and the period for instalments can run anywhere from a minimum of 3 months to a maximum of 12 months.

"After the payment of the instalment, the locked one will get unlocked," Shyam Sunder Sikder, chairman of Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission, told The Daily Star.

The operators will be able to sign deals with mobile manufacturers to provide such handsets to customers, he added.

The customers cannot switch operators without paying the price of the smartphone.

A SIM (subscriber identification module) lock or network lock is a technical restriction built into mobile phones by manufacturers to restrict the use of the devices in specific countries or networks.

Operators in Bangladesh have long wanted to sell 4G-enabled handsets in cooperation with manufacturers on instalments.

A few years back, the Association of Mobile Telecom Operators of Bangladesh and handset manufacturers jointly placed a proposal to the telecom regulator to introduce it.

"There are many individuals who lack the ability to purchase a phone by paying the full price in a single payment. So, it will be a very positive thing for them as they have paid no interest despite paying the price in instalments," said Telecom Minister Mustafa Jabbar.

Customers will have to make a down payment of 20 per cent to 40 per cent of the price and the period for instalments can run from 3 months to 12 months

"We want to increase the penetration and this instalment facility will boost the country's overall mobile phone penetration rate," he said.

Besides, handset manufacturers will be able to sell their phones and operators can boost their customers base, he added.

Grameenphone has been advocating to enhance the accessibility of smartphones to the masses for quite some time, said Hossain Sadat, spokesperson at Grameenphone.

"This will not only increase smartphone penetration but also increase internet usage," he said.

"While we wait to receive the BTRC directive, we welcome the regulatory initiative as this will bridge the digital divide in our country and will accelerate our journey towards 'Smart Bangladesh'," he said.

Robi appreciates this initiative to introduce device locking in Bangladesh which is long pending, said Shahed Alam, Robi's chief corporate and regulatory officer.

"It will directly support the increase in smartphone users which is just over 50 per cent now," he said.

"It will also enable device manufacturers and MNOs to offer smartphones to marginalised populations through convenient ways to fast-track the smartphone adoption by mass people," he said.

Operators now sell phones mostly in collaboration with banks and customers must pay phones in equal monthly instalments, according to industry people.

But it was limited to very few customers, who were selected through rigorous document verification. Customers have to pay a big down payment in such cases.

"But this is different. Since the SIM will be locked into the device till all the payments are made, we will have the confidence to offer it to more customers in greater flexibility," said Alam.

"Even, we can now provide it to the customers living in the remote areas," he added.

However, Banglalink, the third largest operator, expressed apprehensions, saying that the significant amount of cash available to the operators could attract a larger customer base.

"We have always requested the regulator that before taking any regulatory action, they should take the competitive environment into account," saidTaimur Rahman, chief corporate & regulatory affairs officer.

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Indo-Bangla dialogue between think-tanks begins today

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

A two-day dialogue between one think-tank from India and another from Bangladesh will begin in Delhi today in order to discuss a wide range of bilateral issues.

The "India-Bangladesh Strategic Dialogue" is being jointly organised by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) of Bangladesh and the Ananta Aspen Centre in New Delhi, said a press release.

The event will bring together high-level policymakers, experts and partners from both countries.

Participants will deliberate on water sharing, and multimodal connectivity, including road, rail, water, coastal shipping, energy and digital connectivity, said the press release.

"Bilateral cooperation will be explored in novel areas such as monetary cooperation and technology transfer. The evolution of bilateral relations will also be assessed in the context of emerging geo-strategic circumstances."

It is anticipated that at a time when the two countries stand at important crossroads and are heading towards national elections,

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Finova Group keen to invest in Bangladesh

Says Executive Director and Chairman Ricardo Jr Portabella

SHAHRIAR RAHMAN

Ricardo Jr Portabella, executive director and chairman of Finova Group, talked about his visit to Bangladesh and its investment plans in the country during an exclusive interview with The Daily Star. He also shed light on Finova's background, services, and unique investment approach.

DS: Tell us a bit more about Finova group.

Ricardo Jr Portabella: We invested in Finova in 2018 and I joined as the chairman of the group.

Finova Group is based in Singapore and serves clients in Asia. We are basically a multidisciplinary group. We focus on corporate services - from corporate secretarial, accounting, and bookkeeping to tax advisories. We offer recruiting services and have our own employment agency. We have a 70-member team based in Singapore.

Our parent company, Anpora Group, based in Luxembourg, and focuses on the European and the US markets. We have offices in Geneva, London, Barcelona, Madrid, Luxembourg, Singapore, and Kuala Lumpur.

We are trying to build a global network of our own service providers so that our clients from Asia can tap into the US and Europe markets and find opportunities there through our services.

The next step for us is on the mergers and acquisitions side. We plan to introduce "buy-side" advisory services to our clients from the first quarter of 2024.

DS: What has brought you to Bangladesh?

Ricardo Jr Portabella: We have a few loyal clients who are based in Bangladesh, and we have witnessed from their experience how vibrant the startup ecosystem here is. We decided to visit Bangladesh to explore investment opportunities and it has been inspirational to meet talented founders, particularly the ones introduced to us by SBK Tech Ventures. They have shown us some of their portfolio companies and we are inspired by interesting investing opportunities.

DS: What is the source of your capital?

Ricardo Jr Portabella: We invest our own money like a family office. We do not have any third-party investors with mandates. We are keen to invest in startups because we have clients who fund startups. We are not a venture capital company per se, but as we use our own funds we choose to invest in our clients and empower them to do more.

DS: Some investors have an apprehension about investing in countries like Bangladesh. How do you think the process can be expedited, especially for first-time investors?

Ricardo Jr Portabella: I think it's too early for me to understand the challenges, as this is my first trip to Bangladesh. My team and I will engage more frequently in Bangladesh with our clients, stakeholders, and our valued partners. Investing requires courage and the bold are not scared to take risks. We are excited about investing in Bangladesh.

DS: What was your perception about Bangladesh before you came to the country?

Ricardo Jr Portabella: I did not know a lot about Bangladesh before, but I always knew that it is a growing market. A lot of value is being created here and I am bullish about Bangladesh. It is essential to have a positive experience and we are very grateful to SBK Tech Ventures, especially the Managing Partner, Sonia Bashir Kabir, and her amazing team for welcoming us so warmly.

I can honestly say that my first visit to Bangladesh has exceeded my expectations. I am very happy to see the growing market and I am inspired to visit Bangladesh more often.

Musk eyes big India investment

REUTERS, *San Francisco/New Delhi*

Tesla chief executive Elon Musk said India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi was pushing the car maker to make a "significant investment" in the country, adding that such an announcement was expected soon.

His comments came after a meeting with Modi on Tuesday during the Indian leader's state visit to the United States. A source previously told Reuters that Musk would brief Modi on plans to set up a manufacturing base in India.

India has strong potential for a sustainable energy future including solar power, stationary battery packs and electric vehicles, Musk said, adding that he hopes to bring SpaceX's Starlink satellite internet service to India as well.

"He (Modi) really cares about India because he's pushing us to make significant investments in India, which is something we intend to do," Musk told reporters after the meeting.

"I am confident that Tesla will be in India and will do so as soon as humanly possible." Later, India's foreign ministry spokesperson tweeted saying Modi had invited Musk to "explore opportunities in India for investments in electric mobility and rapidly expanding commercial space sector." The South Asian country is now looking to allow some U.S. companies to initially collaborate with Indian firms for investments in its space sector, a source familiar with the matter told Reuters.

India opened the way for private launches in 2020 and wants its private space companies to increase their share of the global launch market by five-fold within the next decade. Executives of Tesla visited India and held talks with Indian bureaucrats and ministers last month on establishing a manufacturing base for cars and batteries in India.

READ MORE ON B2

European businesses in China fight post-Covid blues

AFP, *Beijing*

A faltering recovery, regulatory headaches and an increasingly politicised business climate are hammering European business confidence in China despite the country reopening its doors, according to a survey published on Wednesday.

Two thirds of European companies operating in China say it has become more difficult to do business in the country, according to an annual survey of 570 companies by the European Union Chamber of Commerce in China.

One in 10 are either planning to move their Asia headquarters out of the country or have already done so, said Jens Eskelund, president of the Chamber, with many choosing Singapore.

"Eleven percent of our members have already shifted investments out of China," he added in a briefing to journalists.

For nearly three years, the world's second-largest economy cut itself off with harsh lockdowns and travel restrictions intended to keep the Covid-19 pandemic at bay but which also disrupted factories and supply chains.

Chinese authorities abruptly announced the end of zero-Covid policies last December, raising hopes of an economic recovery after a rapid, massive wave of infections.

But six months on, the post-Covid economic rebound has faded and problems are mounting for foreign firms in China.

Of the companies surveyed, 60 percent said China's increasingly politicised business environment was an issue.

A vague anti-espionage law due to take effect in July, as well as the threat of war with Taiwan, which China considers a part of its territory, are among the top concerns.

There is "more and more government interference in business" since the end of Covid curbs, the manager of a French industrial group operating in east China's Shandong province told AFP.

Officials often target foreign firms with stricter regulatory enforcement while giving Chinese companies more lenient treatment, he said.

"Port charges are up 300 percent" from 2019, while local authorities have "signed favourable agreements with two Chinese groups that are setting up their factories next door," the manager said, asking to remain anonymous for fear of repercussions.

His company would keep their operations in China for now, as "the investment is too big".

But the uncertainty of working in China "undermines the confidence of customers, investors, and the board of directors", he told AFP.

The sudden about-turn on Covid also rattled the foreign business community.

China has created the impression that it is a country where things are "ultimately uncontrollable, as it can decide to close down overnight", a Beijing-based executive at a European company told AFP, also requesting anonymity.

Since the reopening, he has observed a "tightening of the rules" for foreign companies.

"They asked us to put people from the Party in our company, but we refused," he said, referring to China's ruling Communist Party.

PHOTO: AFP/FILE

A vendor looks at Chinese lanterns at a shop in Ruili, west Yunnan Province.