Is NEIR a surveillance tool?

MAHMUDUL HASAN

When the government introduced the National Equipment Identity Register (NEIR), it was presented as a technical solution to a practical problem: stopping illegal mobile phones, blocking stolen devices, and bringing order to Bangladesh's chaotic handset market.

Officially, NEIR is described as a regulatory system, not a surveillance mechanism. Yet, since its announcement, a persistent question has followed it: can NEIR function as a tool for surveillance?

To answer this, it is important to first understand what NEIR does and what it does not do.

NEIR is based on three core identifiers: IMEI (International Mobile Equipment Identity), IMSI (International Mobile Subscriber Identity), and the Mobile Station International Subscriber Directory Number (MSISDN or phone number).

At its core, NEIR is a national database that records the identity of mobile phones and links them to SIM (Subscriber Identity Module) cards.

Every mobile phone has a unique 15-digit IMEI, much like a fingerprint for the device. Every SIM card also carries its own unique code, IMSI, and every phone number is tied to a registered user.

NEIR brings all these elements together in one central system. When a phone connects to a mobile network, its identity is checked against NEIR to determine whether it should be allowed to operate.

From a regulatory point of view, this makes sense. A stolen phone can be blocked nationwide. Smuggled or counterfeit handsets can be shut out of the network. Consumers are protected, and the government gains control over an industry that has long operated with loopholes.

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However, the very features that make NEIR effective also raise concerns.

By permanently linking a physical device, a SIM card, and a phone number, NEIR creates a strong digital identity for every mobile user. This does not mean the system listens to calls or reads messages like traditional surveillance tools -- it does not.

But it does mean that the state has the technical ability to know which device is being used with which SIM, and when that device connects to the network.

Mobile phones constantly communicate with network towers, even when users are not making calls. As a result, telecom networks naturally generate large amounts of metadata.

When such data is centralised in a single national system, it becomes easier to trace patterns of use, movement, and association, especially if the system is later linked with other databases, said an expert.

This is where the surveillance debate begins. NEIR itself is not a classic surveillance system. It does not monitor

PHOTO: **STAR/FILE**

NEIR is a national database that records the identity of mobile phones and links them to SIM (Subscriber Identity Module) cards.

conversations, intercept messages, or spy on internet activity.

Those functions belong to separate lawful interception systems.

"It may not watch you directly, but it can make watching easier if other systems are brought into play," the expert added, wishing anonymity.

Globally, similar systems exist in many countries, including India and Pakistan. None of them is officially labelled as surveillance tools.

In Australia, mobile phone users are protected through a nationwide system that blocks lost or stolen handsets across all mobile networks.

This protection is provided through an industry-led programme run by the Australian Mobile Telecommunications Association (AMTA), rather than direct government intervention.

In the United Kingdom, if you report your phone lost or stolen to your network provider, they will block its IMEI across all UK mobile networks, making the device useless even with a new SIM card.

Rakibul Hassan, an automation expert and author of books on artificial intelligence, said there are widespread fraudulent activities involving digital financial and booking platforms, many of which are difficult for law-enforcement agencies to trace due to weak device-level traceability.

As the world moves rapidly towards a digital economy, almost all transactions, money transfers, services, and even personal profiles are now dependent on mobile connectivity.

In this context, a properly implemented NEIR system can act as a deterrent against scams by preventing anonymous and device-based misuse, he said.

Countries that have robust identity frameworks usually integrate national ID systems, mobile numbers, and device registration mechanisms.

In Bangladesh, while the national ID system exists, it is still not fully and systematically linked with mobile numbers and device identities, creating both enforcement gaps and governance risks.

To address surveillance concerns, Hassan said that the system must operate under strict legal safeguards. Any access to NEIR data, blocking decisions, or cross-system integration should be subject to judicial or quasi-judicial oversight. Arbitrary decisions by regulatory bodies or the government should not be permitted.

![ANALYSIS]

Fahim Mashroor, former president of the Bangladesh Association of Software and Information Services, said, "To me, it's not a surveillance tool, as it is not a targeted surveillance but rather general in scope. Online gambling and financial fraud have grown to an unbearable extent, draining huge amounts of money out of the country. NEIR can help combat these issues."

Rezaur Rahman Lenin, a human rights activist, said there is a misconception about the NEIR system. Mobile phone users and anyone who encounters it should understand that NEIR is not a surveillance tool.

The relevant question is whether the state ensures efficient, appropriate, and timely protection in the context of communication surveillance, including its tools and techniques.

"However, this must be done in strict accordance with the law, its principles, and the protections it affords. The national laws and policies of Bangladesh

on communication surveillance must strike a proper balance between security needs and privacy rights, emphasising legality, necessity, proportionality, transparency, and due process."

An integrated system is necessary. However, the problem is that the series of ordinances related to the digital ecosystem enacted by the interim government -- such as the Cyber Security Ordinance, Personal Data Protection Ordinance, and National Data Governance Ordinance -- have individually and collectively already created a strong surveillance capacity in the hands of the authorities, which can be exercised with hardly any accountability," said Dr Iftekharuzzaman, executive director of Transparency International Bangladesh.

"As a result, the data generated through this system carries a risk of further reinforcing this unaccountable surveillance capacity," he said.

"The implication is that any government of the day may use this digital platform and the wider ecosystem around it at will for targeted suppression of dissent, free speech, and media, and compromise the right to privacy of mobile handset users, recreating the same system of rule by intimidation as under the authoritarian regime that the July Movement fought against. Strong legal provisions must be created to prevent unacceptable surveillance with mandatory judicial oversight," he added.

Faiz Ahmad Taiyeb, special assistant to the chief adviser with executive authority over telecom and ICT, said that the amended telecom ordinance, approved by the advisory council on December 24, includes provisions to protect device users.

"The ordinance adds a clause barring surveillance or harassment of citizens through SIM and device registration, making any violation a punishable offence," he added.

Bangladesh is producing graduates, not skills

MASUD KHAN

Every year, Bangladesh adds several lakhs of new graduates to the labour market. More than a hundred public and private universities, along with thousands of colleges and polytechnic institutes, produce degree holders full of hope. Yet for many young people, graduation marks the beginning of prolonged unemployment or underemployment. Youth unemployment has become a structural crisis, rooted not in a lack of talent, but in an education system that prioritises certificates over competence and memorisation over skills.

Bangladesh operates one of the most fragmented education systems in the world. Bangla medium, English medium, madrasah, quomi madrasah, ebtedayee, technical and vocational streams coexist with little coordination. Instead of building a coherent national framework, policies have often shifted in response to political ideology or short-term objectives. The result is wide inconsistency in learning outcomes. Students graduate with so-called "equivalent" qualifications but vastly different competencies, leaving employers uncertain and graduates ill-prepared for work.

At the heart of the problem lies an outdated obsession with book learning. From primary school to university, students are trained to memorise textbooks, guidebooks, and exam answers. Academic success is measured by grades, not by the ability to think critically, communicate clearly or apply knowledge. This produces graduates who may perform well in examinations but struggle with basic workplace requirements such as writing a professional email, making a presentation, analysing a problem or working in teams.

No education system can rise above the quality of its teachers. In Bangladesh, teaching has gradually lost professional prestige due to low pay, limited training, weak accountability and political interference. In rural areas, absenteeism and outdated teaching methods remain common. Despite government investment in ICT infrastructure, computers and internet facilities in many rural schools are underutilised. Many teachers lack confidence in digital tools and fear that online educational content will expose gaps in their own knowledge. In many areas, teachers depend heavily on paid private tuition, and wider access to online learning could reduce student reliance on coaching. As a result, students are sometimes discouraged from using digital resources.

The gap between academic learning and practical competence is particularly evident in professional education. Engineering universities emphasise theory and written examinations, while hands-on training remains limited. Civil engineering graduates, for example, may lack a practical understanding of construction basics such as proper curing after roof casting. Mechanical or electrical graduates may struggle with simple repairs or fault diagnosis. Business, management and IT education reflect similar weaknesses. Graduates often memorise theories but lack workplace-ready skills, forcing employers to invest heavily in retraining.

The rapid commercialisation of university education has further weakened the quality. While private universities have expanded access, many operate primarily as profit-driven ventures, prioritising enrolment numbers over academic rigour. Weak regulation, overreliance on part-time faculty, and a limited research culture have diluted standards. Degrees have increasingly become commodities rather than reliable indicators of competence, contributing to graduate unemployment.

Vocational education, which could offer a practical alternative, continues to carry social stigma. Despite policy commitments, technical institutions suffer from outdated equipment, weak industry linkages and corruption in certification. Ironically, while graduates remain unemployed, industries report shortages of skilled technicians and mid-level professionals.

The solution lies not in producing more graduates, but in producing graduates equipped with workplace skills. Education reform must shift from exam-based assessment to skill-based learning. Practical training, supervised internships and project work should be mandatory across disciplines. Teachers must be properly trained, fairly paid and incentivised to embrace technology rather than resist it. ICT should be a daily learning tool, not a locked cupboard.

The youth unemployment crisis in Bangladesh is not a failure of young people. It is a failure of systems that reward memorisation over skills and certificates over capability. Unless education is reoriented towards competence, adaptability and real-world relevance, degrees will continue to multiply while opportunities remain out of reach. With honest and sustained reform, the country can still turn its youthful population into its greatest strength.

The writer is the chairman of Unilever Consumer Care Ltd

No quick wins in tapping Venezuela's oil reserves

REUTERS, *Miami*

Venezuela is unlikely to see any meaningful boost to crude output for years even if US oil majors do invest the billions of dollars in the country that President Donald Trump promised just hours following Nicolás Maduro's capture by US forces.

The South American country may have the world's largest estimated oil reserves, but output has plummeted over the past decades amid mismanagement and a lack of investment from foreign firms after Venezuela nationalized oil operations in the 2000s that included the assets of Exxon Mobil and ConocoPhillips.

Any companies that might want to invest there would need to deal with security concerns, dilapidated infrastructure, questions about the legality of the US operation to snatch Maduro and the potential for long-term political instability, analysts told Reuters.

American firms won't return until they know for sure they will be paid and will have at least a minimal amount of security, said Mark Christian, director of business development at CHRIS Well Consulting. He also said the companies would not go back until sanctions against the country are removed.

Venezuela would also have to reform its laws to allow for larger investment by foreign oil companies.

Venezuela nationalized the industry in the 1970s, and in the 2000s ordered a forced migration to joint ventures controlled by its state oil company, PDVSA . Most companies negotiated exits and migrated, including

Chevron, while a handful of others did not reach deals and filed for arbitration.

THERE IS A LOT THAT COULD GO WRONG

"If Trump at all can produce a peaceful transition with little resistance, then in five to seven years there is a significant oil-production ramp up as infrastructure is repaired and investments get sorted out," Thomas O'Donnell, an energy and geopolitical strategist, told Reuters, adding that heavy crude produced in the country works well with US Gulf Coast refineries and can also be blended with lighter oil produced from fracking.

But that would depend on everything going right, and there's a lot that could go wrong.

"A botched political transition that has a feeling of US dominance can lead to years of resistance," O'Donnell said, noting armed groups of citizens and guerrilla groups that operate in the country.

Chevron would be positioned to benefit the most from any potential oil opening in Venezuela, said Francisco Monaldi, director of the Latin America Energy Program at Rice University's Baker Institute in Houston. Other US oil companies would be paying close attention to political stability and would wait to see how the operational environment and contract framework unfolded, he added.

Venezuela - a founding member of Opec with Iran, Iraq, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia - produced as much as 3.5 million barrels per day in the 1970s, which at the time represented over 7 percent of global oil output. Production fell below 2 million bpd during the 2010s and

averaged around 1.1 million bpd last year, or just 1 percent of global production.

CHEVRON IS THE ONLY US OIL MAJOR OPERATING IN VENEZUELA

Chevron is the only American major currently operating in Venezuela. Conoco has been seeking billions for the takeover of three oil projects nearly two decades ago, while Exxon was also involved in lengthy arbitration cases against Venezuela after it exited the

country nearly two decades ago.

"The company that probably will be very interested in going back is Conoco, because they are owed more than $10 billion, and it's unlikely that they will get paid without going back into the country," Monaldi said.

Exxon could also return, but is not owed as much money, he added.

"ConocoPhillips is monitoring developments in Venezuela and their

Workers of the Venezuelan state oil company PDVSA are seen at the El Palito refinery in Puerto Cabello, Venezuela. The South American country may have the world's largest estimated oil reserves, but output has plummeted over the past decades. PHOTO: **AFP/FILE**

potential implications for global energy supply and stability. It would be premature to speculate on any future business activities or investments," a company spokesperson said in emailed comments to Reuters.

Chevron, which exports around 150,000 bpd of crude from Venezuela to the US Gulf Coast, has had to carefully maneuver with the Trump administration in an effort to maintain its presence in the country over the past year. CEO Mike Wirth said in December that he had spoken with the Trump administration about what he said was the importance of maintaining an American presence in the country through multiple political cycles.

The oil firm has been in Venezuela for over 100 years and said on Saturday that it is focused on the safety and well-being of its employees, in addition to the integrity of its assets. "We continue to operate in full compliance with all relevant laws and regulations," a Chevron spokesperson said in an emailed response to questions.

Exxon did not immediately respond to questions from Reuters.

Opec and allies met on Sunday and maintained the current oil output policy. The group has been increasing production since last year, stoking concerns of a global supply glut, but has agreed to pause oil output hikes for January, February and March.

Ed Hirs, an energy fellow at University of Houston, said recent events in Venezuela would have little impact on US prices for oil and gasoline for now, with much of the country's production going to Cuba and China at the moment.