

## **Overnight Ban on Telecoms in Afghan Provinces**

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Insurgents order shut down to avoid being tracked by security forces.

Residents in two northern Afghan provinces have complained that their telecommunication services are suspended each night, leaving them effectively cut off from the outside world.

Threats from Taleban forces in Baghlan and Kunduz provinces have led to the six pm to six am shutdown. This night-time ban on mobile services is a commonly used tactic by the insurgents to stop security forces tracking their movements and to prevent locals providing tip-offs to the Afghan army.

Sometimes they destroy phone antennas if mobile companies refuse to obey a ban.

Locals told IWPR that private telecom companies including Roshan, Afghan Wireless Communication Company (AWCC), Multinational Telecommunication Network (MTN) and Etisalat all now shut their services down each night.

Mohammad Ali, a 30-year-old from Fabrika-e-Qand in Baghlan said that he could not use his Etisalat phone services after dark.

“Security conditions are poor in Baghlan province, and when we want to know about our friends and relatives we find that our mobile phone services, our only means of communication, are disabled,” he said. “Similarly, our relatives face the same problem when they want to contact us.”

The only telecoms company that provides limited services at night is the state-owned Salam Communication Company. However, people living in areas under Taleban control say that it is too dangerous for them to access these services.

Dand-e-Shahabuddin, Burka and Baghlan-e-Markazi districts all have a significant Taleban presence. Another district, Dahana-e-Ghori has been fully under Taleban control for the past two years.

Abdul Mateen is a 20-year-old student who travels to the provincial capital from the Poza Eshan area of Baghlan-e-Markazi district, which is under the control of Taleban.

He said that the insurgents have warned that they will kill anyone they find using a Salam SIM card.

“After I pass the part...where Taleban are present and arrive in the city, I then activate my Salam SIM card,” Mateen said. “But when I want to return home, I either give my Salam SIM card to one of my friends or I hide it so that Taleban don’t find it during their search.”

Mahmood Akmal, the spokesman for the Baghlan governor, confirmed the shutdown.

“The Taleban have threatened to set the antennas of telecom companies on fire if they don’t cut their services off at night,” he said, adding that they were trying to find ways to address this problem.

The Taleban also said that they had instructed networks to deactivate overnight so that their groups’ whereabouts could not be tracked.

Taleban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid said, “All the telecom networks have been warned to suspend their services during the night because Afghan and international security forces have in the past traced and attacked Taleban groups through their mobile phone signals.”

For their part, Baghlan security officials said that the Taleban threats were a sign that the government counter-insurgency strategy had put them on the defensive.

Baghlan police head of press Zabeullah Shijah told IWPR, “The Taleban haven’t made any significant advances in the past few years and their group attacks in the provincial capital and cities of Baghlan province have been repelled, so now the Taleban are trying to pose obstacles to the activities of security forces by using these techniques.”

He explained that they had informed Kabul of the issue and were waiting for instructions as to how to proceed.

Nazar Mohammad Hamaward, director of Baghlan’s department of communications and information technology, said that the Taleban had already destroyed telecom towers in some areas, leaving phone and internet providers afraid that their infrastructure would be damaged if they failed to comply with the

threats.

He added that “the services of Roshan, MTN, Etisalat and AWCC telecommunication networks have been suspended for nearly two months but security officials are making their best efforts to solve this problem as soon as possible.”

People in neighbouring Kunduz said that they had been facing the same issue for the last six months.

Kunduz resident Nasrullah said, “My nine-month-old was very sick last night, so I tried to contact a taxi driver whose phone number I had to take my baby to hospital but I couldn’t reach him. I had to leave home to search for a taxi, and finally found one with great difficulty and took my baby to the hospital. If I hadn’t taken him to hospital, he would have died at home,” the 35-year-old concluded.

Niamatullah Temor, the spokesman for the Kunduz governor, confirmed that private telecom companies suspended their services after 6pm across the province.

“The branches of these telecom companies in Kunduz province don’t have the authority to activate their networks and to provide communication services during the night because the services are disabled directly from Kabul,” he said. “But we will try to hold talks with the offices in the capital so that we can find a solution and enable telecom services.”

Officials at the communications and IT ministry in Kabul said that they were aware of the problem.

The ministry’s head of press, Khan Zaman Amarkhel, said, “Although we haven’t received anything official from Baghlan and Kunduz provinces on this issue, we have found out through people that such problems do exist. Private telecom networks are being threatened to suspend their services in less insecure areas or areas under the control of Taleban.”

Mohammad Shafeh Sharifi, Roshan’s head of media, refused to comment as he said he had not been given the authority to discuss the issue. Representatives of Etisalat and MTN also refused to discuss the issue.

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