

Comms: the great Blackberry spyphone scandal

It's just the sort of publicity Etisalat doesn't need as it tries to boost its global profile amid plans for global expansion: a patch issued for Blackberry phones running on its network is accused of both draining the batteries - and spying on users. And its denials are getting very short shrift.

Emirates Telecommunications Corporation, or Etisalat, says it is to spend USD1,400 million on a new fibre optic network to improve international connectivity within the UAE to cover 90% of the population. It's signed an MOU in advance of a three year sponsorship deal with the other Manchester soccer club, City, bought by Gulf business interests from former Thai PM Thaksin when his assets were frozen by a Thai court. The deal will allow a mobile infostream for club supporters in the UAE and other Etisalat regions.

The company has announced that African subscribers are expected to increase by more than 20% next year.

And it says that it will "enhance global connectivity for corporate customers" by the extension of its own switching network - nodes in the US, UK, Egypt, Kuwait and other places will be on the end of Etisalat's own network, with final links via local operators.

That's all well and good, but if, as one report said in July this year, "more than 50% of Etisalat's Blackberry customers are planning to ditch the UAE telecoms provider," and those Blackberry customers being both the business market and premium users it is striving to attract, then there are problems looming.

Arabian Business reports that in its on-line poll, approx 36% of respondents said they would cancel their Etisalat contract "immediately," switching to rival Du.

The problems began with the release by Etisalat of what it described as "a performance enhancement patch." Users almost immediately began to complain that whatever the patch was doing, it was using up battery power at an alarming rate.

Then someone started to look at what the software actually does. And reported that it appeared to have some kind of e-mail and SMS monitoring function.

Etisalat responded that this was not so, and that the patch was designed to aid handovers between 2G and 3G base stations.

But Blackberry's manufacturer, Research in Motion, said "RIM is not not aware of any technical network concerns with the performance of BlackBerry smartphones on Etisalat's network in the UAE." And it distanced itself from the patch in the strongest possible terms: "RIM was not involved in any way in the testing, promotion or distribution of this software application."

Arabian Business quoted Dan Hoffman, the chief technical officer of SMobile, a company that produces popular anti-virus and security packages for BlackBerry phones: "We did thorough analysis at our global threat centre. No doubt about it, it was intended to intercept people's emails and forward them on to someone else."

RIM's statement was not issued via a press-release, but it is damning nonetheless.

RIM Statement [here](#) says "

Recently, certain Etisalat customers in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) may have received an SMS message from Etisalat inviting the customer to click on a link and download a software application provided by Etisalat on to their BlackBerry Handheld. The Etisalat software application, named "Registration", was described by Etisalat as a BlackBerry software upgrade designed to improve performance. Etisalat's "Registration" software application is not in fact a RIM-authorized software upgrade and was not developed, tested, promoted, distributed or authorized in any way by RIM.

Further, RIM does not use SMS as an official distribution channel for official BlackBerry software upgrades or updates. RIM distributes official BlackBerry software upgrades and updates through

standard channels, including direct downloads from BlackBerry.com and over-the-air using the built in Wireless Upgrade feature of the BlackBerry smartphone.

Independent sources have concluded that Etisalat's "Registration" software application is not actually designed to improve performance of a BlackBerry Handheld, but rather to send received messages back to a central server.

RIM has developed this App Remover software ("Software") to enable affected customers to remove Etisalat's "Registration" software application.

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