

Telecom agents probed over sale of pre-registered SIM cards to criminals

By Vision Reporter

The Police have launched a nationwide investigation into telecom agents suspected of illegally selling pre-registered SIM cards to criminal gangs.

This follows the seizure of 30 SIM cards from a suspected organised crime network during a security crackdown across the country. The probe is targeting individuals within telecom distribution chains believed to be exploiting loopholes in the SIM card registration system to facilitate criminality.

Investigators suspect some agents register multiple SIM cards using unsuspecting citizens' national identification details and later sell them to criminals at a fee, enabling anonymous communication.

The recovered SIM cards are now at the centre of forensic analysis aimed at linking them to unsolved cases, including robberies, kidnappings, murders, mobile money fraud and the theft of motorcycle and motor vehicle number plates.

Addressing journalists at the Police headquarters in Naguru, Kampala, Police spokesperson Rusoke Kituuma said the exhibits were recovered during intelligence-led operations conducted between February 16-22, this year.

"In the course of these operations, we recovered several SIM cards from suspects, who are currently in custody. These items are now undergoing detailed forensic analysis," Kituuma said.

ARRESTS

The co-ordinated crackdowns have so far resulted in the arrest of at least 1,095 suspects across the country, with more than 700 apprehended within Kampala Metropolitan area alone.

Kituuma said they recovered more than 30 SIM cards from a group believed to be involved in organised criminal activity in Gulu city alone, raising suspicion of structured communication networks rather than isolated street crime.

A senior detective involved in the investigations said the focus has now shifted to telecom agents suspected of facilitating the illegal registration and distribution of SIM cards.

"We are looking into a pattern where agents register SIM cards in bulk using national IDs belonging to other

people, especially in rural communities, and later sell those lines to criminals. This creates anonymity and complicates investigations," the detective said.

He said criminals are willing to pay a premium for such lines because they can be activated and discarded after use, making it difficult for law enforcement to trail them.

This problem is not new. Security first encountered the full scale of SIM card misuse during the probe into the 2018 kidnap and murder

of Susan Magara, the daughter of businessman John Magara. She was abducted from Lungujja in Rubaga division, Kampala, on her way home in February 2018.

Her kidnappers demanded a ransom of \$1m

1,095

The number of suspects arrested during the operation countrywide.

(about sh3.5b). Despite partial payment, she was killed and her body was dumped along the Entebbe Expressway at Munyonyo, Kampala.

During the investigation, forensic experts discovered that the kidnappers had used multiple SIM cards that were neither registered in their real names nor traceable to their identities.

A similar pattern was observed in a major telecom fraud case in 2022, when hackers infiltrated a mobile money bank-to-wallet platform and used more than 1,800 pre-registered SIM cards to transfer sh7.6b within days.

These cases exposed vulnerabilities in the SIM card registration system and triggered reforms aimed at tightening verification processes.

Despite the reforms, criminal

networks continue to exploit weaknesses through corrupt intermediaries, stolen identification documents and fraudulent registration.

NUMBER PLATES

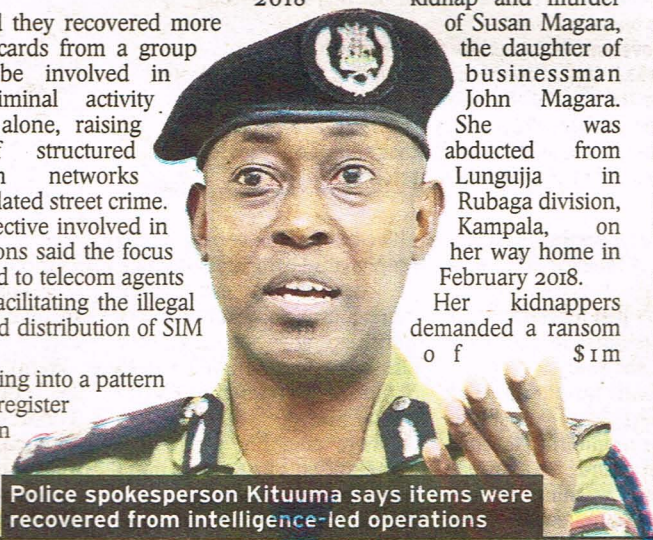
The Police are also examining possible links between the seized SIM cards and syndicates involved in the theft of motorcycles and vehicle number plates.

In such operations, criminals may use one SIM card to trail a target, another to co-ordinate theft and another to negotiate with victims. Once the transaction is complete, the lines are discarded.

The stolen number plates are sometimes mounted onto other vehicles to disguise identities during robberies, evade traffic enforcement systems or facilitate cross-border smuggling.

"The SIM card becomes an operational tool. It allows criminals to separate different stages of the crime. If one communication channel is compromised, the rest remain hidden," a cybersecurity analyst said.

Kituuma said each SIM card recovered will undergo detailed forensic scrutiny, including call data record analysis, geolocation mapping and link analysis to identify networks.



Police spokesperson Kituuma says items were recovered from intelligence-led operations