

Free Internet and other pre-election goodies roll out for Christmas

THE NATION

IN A BID to garner popularity ahead of the election scheduled for February, the government has finalised plans to give more than 11 million low-income people free Internet SIM cards and other state subsidies that will together cost taxpayers billions of baht.

The Finance Ministry has proposed that the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC) offer Internet access free of charge to underprivileged people who hold state welfare cards.

Finance Minister Apisak Tantivorawong said it would benefit farmers, for example, who could access market crop prices and other useful data in real time.

He said farmers would be able to follow price trends on low-cost smartphones so they could make more informed decisions on what and when to plant, avoiding issues like over-supply. The NBTC would work out the details, Apisak said, and low-income people other than farmers would also benefit from online access to improve their individual economic well-being.

They could, for example, track job opportunities or seek training to develop new skills, thus getting the chance to upgrade their employment situation.

Apisak said the free Internet scheme was not intended for entertainment or gaming and should be first tested for six months pending Cabinet approval.

State-owned TOT Plc would be responsible for providing the service to registered low-income people around the country, he said.

Pocket money for New Year

Meanwhile, Suthirat Rattanachote, chief of the Comptroller-General's Department, said the government would also start adding money to welfare cards later this month to help them buy necessities for the year-end.

More than 11 million people on annual income under Bt100,000 – less than Bt8,300 per month – have registered for and received welfare cards, qualifying for state subsidies including limited amounts of electricity and tap water.

Suthirat said the money would be transferred to welfare cardholders from December through September 2019. They will have to pay their electricity and water bills initially but would be reimbursed on a monthly basis. In addition, the government will transfer Bt500 to each cardholder from December 8-10 as part of the welfare plan to boost purchasing power.

An unspecified number of disabled citizens and people over 60 will receive the same amount in January and February.

Other measures include a Bt1,000 subsidy for people aged 65 and older to cover their expenses commuting to healthcare facilities, and another Bt400 for monthly rent.

The raft of benefits will cost billions of baht in tax money as the government gears up its state welfare campaign ahead of the general election.

The 11 million-plus citizens registered for welfare and listed in a government database so the Finance Ministry can transfer money directly to their PromptPay bank accounts, bypassing intermediaries.