

Govt readies handout of data-bundled SIM cards

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The Finance Ministry plans to seek the cabinet's approval to supply registered low-income earners, currently receiving a range of state welfare benefits, with a mobile phone SIM card offering a free internet connection.

"The purpose of the free internet is to ensure the poor have access to internet-based sources of information and news that concerns them," said Finance Minister Apisak Tantivorawong.

"Information about farming and agricultural product price forecasts, for instance, should help farmers plan their production better and avoid an oversupply of particular types of crops," he said.

Two options have been prepared for the distribution of the free internet SIMs, according to the minister.

For those who already own a SIM with an internet connection, the government will top up the package to a point considered sufficient for their use. As for the people who do not already have a package that includes

the internet, a new SIM with a data allowance will be provided, he said.

"The government only wants to guarantee access to key information and news. This doesn't mean we are giving away free SIMs for watching films, playing games or listening to music," he said.

The National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC) is finalising the total costs and details, including data allotment, he said.

Only low-income earners with a state welfare card will be eligible to receive the free internet SIM.

The next round of registration for welfare cards is expected to come next year and possibly after the new government takes office, Mr Apisak said.

Some criteria will be changed, including the use of the household income instead of personal income to determine eligibility, he said.

In the previous rounds some older people who were living with and being supported by wealthy family members still received cards, he added.