

UCC to switch off 9 million phones

By David Lumu

The Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) and all licensed telecom operators are working on mechanisms to deactivate any phones whose specifications fall short of the minimum standards.

In recent years, the country has been a dumping ground for cheap, counterfeit and second-hand mobile phones, often sold on the streets.

Out of the estimated 24 million mobile phone users in the country, 40% are using counterfeit phones, a trend communication regulators say has complicated the safety of consumers in the country.

This means that at least 9.6 million Ugandans have fake cellular phones.

According to a 2014 survey commissioned by UCC, the increasing number of counterfeit phones is attributed to laxity by custom officials at the Uganda Revenue Authority, black market smuggling and not enough technology to switch counterfeit phones off the telecom grid.

To address the challenge of counterfeit phones on the market, Irene Sewankambo, the director of engineering at UCC, on Wednesday met with URA's commissioner for customs Dickson Kateshumbwa to



At least 9.6 million Ugandans, according to UCC, have fake phones. UCC will give Ugandans a grace period to replace their phones before they are switched off



UCC boss Godfrey Mutabazi

craft measures of dealing with counterfeit phones during clearance.

Speaking to *New Vision* yesterday, Ibrahim Bbosa, the head of consumer protection at UCC, said although the current index of counterfeit phones is at 40% of the total mobile phone users in the country, plans were underway to commission another mini-survey to establish the current statistical presence of

counterfeit phones.

"In 2014, UCC commissioned a consultant to conduct a survey on counterfeit phones in the country. The data we have now is that 40% of mobile phones are counterfeits," he said.

Godfrey Mutabazi, the UCC director, said some of the phones are smuggled into the country, while in some cases, confiscated shipments have been protected by law

How to verify

UCC has provided a feature on its website www.ucc.co.ug for subscribers to verify whether their phones are genuine.

- Type *#06# on your mobile phone to get its IMEI, a 15-digit code.
- Fill the number into a box on the UCC website and press "Verify My Phone."
- The model, manufacturer and frequency bands of the phone corresponding with the IMEI code are instantly displayed.
- If the details do not match, your phone is fake and will soon become unusable. Many countries have activated CEIR to prevent cloning of IMEIs and discourage theft of phones.

enforcement agencies.

Under the proposed system, mobile phones without authentic International Mobile Equipment Identity (IMEI)/serial numbers, will not connect to any of the registered telecom networks.

The IMEI, which reveals the manufacturer of the cellular phone and model, is a unique identification code for each mobile device, a 15-digit number used to identify a device.

Bbosa told *New Vision* that UCC and telecom operators had agreed to assemble a team of engineers to re-activate the Central Equipment Identity Register (CEIR), a database that contains a list of IMEIs of mobile terminals which are active on the mobile network.

"We have agreed to prioritise SIM card replacements and then deal with counterfeit phones. Already, engineers from UCC and all telecom operators are assessing the re-activation of the equipment that will help us switch off counterfeit phones," he said.

"On our part as a regulator, the equipment will enable us block counterfeit phones," he said. Bbosa said when UCC finalises meeting all stakeholders, they will issue a notice of grace period for those with fake phones before blocking them.

Bbosa said most counterfeit phones are illegal copies of popular brands and cannot be tracked by law enforcement agencies when used in execution of criminal activities in the country.