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Don't use data as weapon

Data is the new oil. Data can also be a new weapon especially when it is systematically harvested and used to manipulate people's opinions and behaviour.

This is why the Ministry of Defence can't be casual about requesting, storing or using people's mobile phone data even for the sake of tracking and tracing the Covid-19 spread.

The situation does not look promising. The ministry told the public it has been involved in a plan to use people's mobile phone data to monitor the virus outbreak.

It only came clean after independent academic Sarinee Achavanuntakul published documents detailing how people's mobile phone data can be used to support the public health ministry in controlling Covid-19's spread.

Even as the defence ministry owned up to its involvement, it gave confusing information.

Defence Ministry spokesman Lt Gen Kongcheep Tantravanich denied the ministry had requested mobile phone numbers and location data of people who may have been in the same vicinity with those confirmed to have contracted Covid-19 during the past 14 days.

He insisted the security agency has no authority to demand private mobile phone information. The director of the ministry's own Policy and Planning Office Gen Raksak Rojphimphun, however, said his office has been

involved with a project to use the mobile phone data to curb the outbreak.

Gen Raksak said his office had discussed the possibility of developing a track-and-trace application with all five mobile phone operators, the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission and Ministry of Digital Economy and Society.

Access to mobile phone data will be useful as the application will be able to send alerts promptly to people who came from areas of infection or were in the same place as confirmed cases.

Gen Raksak also said the ministry's track-and-trace app was finished last month but it has not been launched yet as it is going through a trial. According to him, no data has been harvested yet either as the app was developed in preparation for a second virus wave.

When asked about the public's personal information and privacy protection, Gen Raksak simply said the defence ministry is not using people's data for any malicious purposes. It is only trying to help efforts to curb the spread of the disease.

The ministry's responses leave major room for the public to worry.

According to the leaked documents which Gen Raksak said are genuine, it's not just the defence ministry's policy and planning office that was involved in the application but the directorate of joint intelligence, directorate of joint operations and the national police commission.

What roles do these security-related agencies play in monitoring the disease?

Another major question is why would the new app be necessary when the government has relied on the Thai Chana platform to collect people's movement data.

While it is indisputable that mobile phone data are extremely useful in monitoring the disease, government agencies can no longer ignore the need to protect people's personal data and privacy. It's no longer enough to cite a "good intention" or an ambiguous purpose of monitoring a disease's spread to justify harvesting personal data without proper governance.

If the Defence Ministry continues to be involved with the new track-and-trace application, it must explain its role in a clearer, more meaningful and precise manner.