

Airtel to NPCI: Will return ₹190cr subsidy to original a/cs

New Delhi: Within days of getting a rap on its knuckles, Airtel on Monday offered to return Rs 190 crore subsidy that had flown into the 'unsolicited' Payments Bank accounts of its 31 lakh mobile phone subscribers, sources said.

Airtel wrote to National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) on Monday promising to return Rs 190 crore (along with interest) to the consumers' original bank accounts that were linked to the Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT), the sources familiar with the development said. NPCI is an umbrella organisation for all retail payments in India. Both Airtel and Airtel Payments bank came under fire after Airtel allegedly opened accounts of its mobile phone subscribers without seeking their "informed consent", and LPG subsidy worth crores was deposited to these accounts.

The government acted swiftly in the matter and the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI), in a stern move late last week, temporarily barred the company from conducting Aadhaar-based SIM verification of mobile customers using eKYC process and e-KYC of payments bank clients.

Suspending the 'e-KYC licence key', the Aadhaar issuing body UIDAI also ordered PricewaterhouseCoopers to conduct an audit of Bharti Airtel and Airtel Payments Bank to ascertain if their systems and processes are in compliance with the Aadhaar Act. "The government has taken a stern view of the entire issue and Airtel has been forced to return the amount to original bank account of these customers," said a government source who did not wish to be named.

The mechanism of the DBT benefits floating into the accounts is also being tightened, to bring in greater accountability, he noted. Airtel declined to comment when asked about its offer to return Rs 190 crore subsidy to original bank accounts of its 31 lakh customers. Responding to the statement issued by HPCL, Airtel Payments Bank spokesperson said, "as per government rules, DBT subsidy goes to latest Aadhaar linked bank account. Customers can withdraw this at any of our designated outlets. No charges for such withdrawals are levied". AGENCIES