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Mobile phone charges to be queried

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China will launch a long-awaited price hearing conference this month to discuss ending the high roaming fees on mobile phones, the country's top telecommunications regulator said Wednesday.

Representatives of consumers, experts, mobile carriers and the China Consumers' Association will be involved in the conference in Beijing, the Ministry of Information said.

Chinese mobile carriers often charge users 0.60 yuan (8 US cents) a minute as a cross-province roaming fee, which most travelers and experts say is too expensive.

An upper limit for roaming will be set after the conference, the information ministry said on its Website, without providing details.

Industry insiders said the cap will probably be between 0.20 yuan and 0.40 yuan per minute.

"The roaming fees should be abolished as roaming involves hardly any costs to the carriers except for the fee calculation process for the carriers' provincial branches," said Sandy Shen, a telecommunications analyst at Gartner Inc.

China is the only country in the world to charge users roaming fees in one network over different provinces, said Shen at the IT research firm.

It is unjustifiable that users are charged this high rate as the cost for roaming is similar to e-mail, said Kan Kaili, a professor at Beijing University of Post and Telecommunications.

Operators spend about 0.02 yuan per minute providing roaming services, making it a most profitable sector for them, industry insiders said.

According to Shanghai Mobile and Shanghai Unicom's common fee policy, they charge users 1.30 yuan a minute. The fee is broken down to 0.60 yuan for roaming and 0.70 yuan for a long distance call - both outgoing and incoming - when users are outside Shanghai. Local calls cost about 0.13 yuan per minute.

The ministry conducted an online survey last May asking people their thoughts on roaming charges. Respondents said the roaming fee should be 0.05 yuan to 0.20 yuan higher per minute than a local call.

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