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Don't let 'ah long' hijack your data

Tips from cybersecurity experts on how best to avoid this big trouble

By ALIZA SHAH and IYLIA MARSYA ISKANDAR
newsdesk@thestar.com.my

PETALING JAYA: Don't install any suspicious Android Package (APK) file or links sent to your mobile device to avoid data breaches, a cybersecurity expert has warned.

APK is a file format used by Android operating system for the distribution and installation of mobile apps, usually via Google Play Store.

CF Fong, the founder of cybersecurity firm LGMS, said it is crucial for users to check access permissions needed by any app that they wish to download.

His advice comes following reports on the latest modus operandi of "ah long" (illegal moneylenders) who use mobile apps that allow them to gain access to victims' handphones.

The Star recently reported that these mobile apps have a pre-condition requiring potential borrowers to allow access to their device.

Fong said he has observed that the ah long apps function like spyware that enables them to hijack text messages and control the phone's camera and microphone.

He said uninstalling such apps may not stop the victims' data from being infringed.

"If the apps have backdoors (methods by which unauthorised users are able to get around security measures and gain access) installed, then the ah long can still access data despite the apps being deleted," he added.

What should users do to get rid of the apps?

"Install an anti-virus programme to scan for any suspicious apps or factory-reset their phones," Fong advised.

In *The Star* reports on March 26, it was highlighted that ah long have upped their game with the use of mobile apps that allow them to steal data from mobile phones of borrowers who end up as unwitting victims of their ploy.

Access to information such as photos as well as personal videos and contact lists is used to intimidate the victims into continuing to make payments even after full settlement.

There are over 20 of these apps that have been identified on the Google Play store such as 126 loan, Ace Credit, De Capital, Easy Duit and JF Credit.

Kuala Lumpur Consumer Safety Association president Samsuddin Mohamad Fauzi, who has been dealing with such cases over the past few years, said borrowers who had completed their payments should not entertain ah long's demands for additional payments.

"The scammers will not stop no matter how much you pay them. They will continue to ask for more and the minute you stop paying them, they will 'viral' your edited pictures. So, ignore their requests.

"The next step after you ignore them is to update everyone in your contact list, send them a message to inform them of your situation.

"Tell them that you are a victim of an ah long who has gained access to your contact list and that these illegal moneylenders might spread false information about you," he said, adding that victims should lodge a police report.

Samsuddin also suggested that victims change their mobile numbers to avoid constant harassment.