

Sri Lanka consumer rights activist wins Presidential spam battle

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ECONOMYNEXT - Thishya Weragoda is an Attorney at Law of Sri Lanka's Supreme Court who has done what few citizens would dare, or bother, to do – got a mobile phone operator to block unsolicited New Year greetings from the president.

Successive presidents have been in the habit of unfailingly sending New Year texts greetings to all Sri Lankans with mobile phones using SMS (short message service) on digital mobile networks.

Many Sri Lankans would treat the president's New Year greetings as unsolicited text messages, like mass marketing texts sent by vendors who manage to get the phone numbers of subscribers or spam on email.

Some wouldn't bother to read the message, deleting it like other unsolicited marketing SMSs. Those who try to wish the president in return complain they are unable to reply to the presidential SMS greetings.

But Weragoda was determined to end what he regarded as a violation of consumer rights in the digital age.

He acknowledges he could have ignored the presidential text messages as others do unsolicited marketing messages.

The practice of touting products or services in blind text message campaigns is a waste money, since consumers treat them as a nuisance, e-commerce businesspeople told a forum to mark the World Consumer Rights Day on Wednesday, March 15.

"I did it on a matter of principle," Weragoda told the forum on consumer rights in the digital age held by the Institute of Policy Studies, a think-tank. "I feel as citizens we have individual responsibility to say our space is not invaded upon."

Weragoda said he succeeded in getting the mobile phone operator Mobitel to block the president's new year greetings after much effort and even threat of litigation.

"I ultimately got Mobitel to block it because I made so much trouble for them."

Consumers have no option of blocking the four-digit number used to send such text messages on their own, Weragoda said, noting that existing consumer protection laws were inadequate to cope with digital age habits.

Vendors go to extraordinary lengths to harvest lists of consumer mobile phone numbers, he also said, recalling how once a bank made an unsolicited call to try to sell him a credit card.

Weragoda pestered the caller demanding to know how the bank had got his mobile phone number, to be eventually told that the bank had harvested his number from a newspaper advertisement to sell his car five years previously. (COLOMBO, March 17, 2017)