

CELL PHONE REMITTANCES

Given yesterday's discussion about the Taliban extorting money from Afghan cell phone providers, I wanted to link to today's story describing the expansion of such cell phone based payment systems in Latin America.

Sending money back home? Just press "talk."

That's what Western Union, Radio Shack and the small wireless carrier Trumpet Mobile hope millions of Hispanic immigrants will do with a new service announced yesterday.

[snip]

Under the plan, a customer could buy a Trumpet Mobile phone, which costs \$29.99 at Radio Shack. The user can load the phone with money through Western Union. To send money to a relative in Nicaragua, for example, a customer would specify the amount and the recipient over the phone. The money would then be debited from the customer's account and routed to a local agent in Nicaragua, who would dispense the money to the relative.

I guess that answers my question about whether the Taliban were extorting actual currency or just cell phone minutes.

There are several interesting aspects of this story. Barnett Rubin described the cell phone extortion in Afghanistan as a way to work around Western Union—which was quickly co-opted by US intelligence after 9/11. But here, Western Union is one of the three partners. So I suspect this an attempt to avoid losing any more money transfer business to cell phone carriers.

The story also notes that Western Union offers this service in India and Philippines. So

between Kashmir, Colombia, and Philippines' own Islamic extremists, this puts Western Union in several areas with their own terrorist problems.

I wonder how involved the US is in backing this venture? Anyone know anything about Trumpet Mobile?