Industry Minister to meet with telecoms after 'unacceptable' Rogers outage

Rogers said its networks were close to being fully operational on Sunday, but some customers were continuing to experience 'intermittent challenges' with service

Salmaan Farooqui, Susan Krashinsky Robertson and Emerald Bensadoun

The federal Industry Minister will meet with the CEOs of Rogers Communications Inc. RCI-A-T and other major telecommunications companies on Monday to discuss improving network reliability, after a massive outage late last week that shut down Rogers services across Canada.

The outage on Friday left Rogers customers throughout the country without internet, wireless and home phone service. Many were unable to call 911 or make purchases with debit or credit cards. Hospitals, public transit, border crossings and countless other public and private services were disrupted.

The minister, François-Philippe Champagne, has told Rogers CEO Tony Staffieri that "the situation is unacceptable," according to a statement from Alexander Wellstead, Mr. Champagne's spokesperson.

"These services are vitally important for Canadians in their day to day life and we expect our telecom industry to meet the highest standards that Canadians rightly deserve," Mr. Wellstead said.

The outage highlighted Rogers's ubiquity in Canada at a time when it is attempting to convince federal regulators that its proposed $26-billion takeover of Shaw Communications Inc. SJR-A-X won't harm consumers by reducing competition in the telecom industry. One of the regulatory bodies from which the merger still needs approval is Mr. Champagne's ministry.

Rogers system failure happened after maintenance update to core network: CEO

The Rogers outage disrupted services across Canada. A list of what was affected

Rogers said the outage occurred after a maintenance update to its core network. Mr. Staffieri said in a statement on Saturday that a system failure led the company's routers to malfunction.

On Sunday, Rogers's networks were "close to fully operational," spokesperson Zac Carreiro said in a statement, but he added that some customers were continuing to experience "intermittent challenges with their services" and that technical teams were working to resolve them.

Rogers did not answer questions about whether it is examining building network backups for essential services such as hospitals and 911 systems. And the company did not provide any further information about the billing credits it has promised to customers affected by the outage, including how long it will take to process those credits.

"We're particularly troubled that some customers could not reach emergency services and we are addressing the issue as an urgent priority," Mr. Staffieri said in his Saturday statement.

But critics are unimpressed with the explanation after the telecom's second major service interruption in two years. The previous Canada-wide Rogers outage, in April 2021, affected only the company's wireless customers.

"I do think the regulator needs to recognize this represents a serious risk, and that it must fall to the incumbent telecom carriers to begin identifying potential solutions," said Michael Geist, a law
professor and the Canada research chair in internet and e-commerce law at the University of Ottawa. "It was shocking to see how many services that we rely upon were just completely unavailable - and that they have not positioned themselves to ensure that if there was an extended outage, there were alternatives."

The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), the industry regulator, could not say how many complaints it had received as a result of the outage.

"We are in regular contact with Rogers to understand the cause of the outage," CRTC spokesperson Patricia Valladao wrote in a statement on Sunday. "We will take all actions necessary to examine what occurred and put in place the necessary measures to better protect Canadians in the future."

Mr. Staffieri said the company will complete a root-cause analysis to determine what exactly went wrong, and will make necessary changes to its network.

John Lawford, the executive director of the Public Interest Advocacy Centre, a consumer advocacy organization, said such an outage should not have occurred as a result of routine maintenance. His group has made a formal request to the CRTC for a probe into the incident. The CRTC's Ms. Valladao declined to answer questions as to whether the regulator is considering such a probe.

"I'd expect a certain level of disaster control for routine maintenance such that you're not putting the whole system in the firing line," Mr. Lawford said.

"I don't think, having had something similar a year ago, that it's acceptable to have an outage happen again at that scale."

People across the country were demanding better reliability from Rogers, including Lara Morgan, who described a frantic scene when she tried to call 911 after her 15-year-old son was injured at a rugby game on Friday in Markham, Ont.

Ms. Morgan said on-site staff feared her son had suffered a spinal injury. She had to run around the field to find someone who had a non-Rogers phone to call an ambulance. She was told dispatchers were being forced to direct ambulances manually, because their communication and tracking system relied on a Rogers connection. She said she waited at the side of a road, not knowing how long it would take for emergency responders to arrive, while on-site staff tried to keep her son's head stable.

Ms. Morgan eventually learned her son's spine was not injured, but he was concussed. She was unable to contact her husband, who also had a Rogers cellphone.

"It was terrifying," she said.

Health care workers dealt with interruptions on the job. Among them was Andrew Shepherd, a registered nurse who works at a Quinte Health Care hospital near Hastings, Ont. When one of Mr. Shepherd's patients had a seizure early Friday morning, he tried to page a doctor. Because of the outage, there was no response.

Luckily, he said, the patient's seizure was mild. "What if something catastrophic happened and we weren't able to get a hold of this physician?" he now wonders.

Hours later, he said, the hospital began using loudspeakers to page doctors.

Businesses and governments across the country said their services were beginning to return to normal on Saturday. Multiple police forces said their 911 services, which had been knocked offline during the outage, were able to receive calls once again.

The incident took down the Interac debit system. "Moving forward we are adding a supplier to strengthen our existing network redundancy," spokesperson Bryan Bossin wrote in an e-mail on Sunday.

The country's entertainment industry was also affected. The Weekend was forced to cancel his performance at the Rogers Centre in Toronto because of logistical issues related to the outage.

PIAC's Mr. Lawford called on the government to mandate better communication during major outages. He noted that Rogers said little about the cause of the outage on Friday and didn't offer a timeline for repairs.

"You have to at least give some communication to the customers... and there's no rules around that right now," he said.

Mr. Geist, the law professor, called for structural change in the telecom industry. "We need a more competitive environment so that there is that ability to have more redundancies in many of those essential services, and more choice for consumers," he said.

"Hopefully this is a wake-up call."

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