

China backs down from requirement for Web filter

June 30 2009, By JOE McDONALD , AP Business Writer



Customers surf the Internet at an Internet cafe in Beijing, China, Tuesday, June 30, 2009. A California company that says its software was illegally used in Beijing's new Internet filter threatened possible legal action as PC makers faced a Wednesday deadline to supply the system with computers. U.S. trade officials and industry and free-speech groups have also appealed to Beijing to revoke its order, which requires suppliers to pre-install the Green Dam filtering software or include it on a disk with each PC sold from July 1. (AP Photo/Greg Baker)

(AP) -- In a rare reversal, China's government gave in to domestic and international pressure and backed down Tuesday from a rule that would have required personal computers sold in the country to have Internet-filtering software.

Just hours before the rule was to have taken effect, the government said it would postpone the requirement for the "Green Dam" software. The

Ministry of Industry and Information Technology said it made the decision partly because some PC markets were having difficulty meeting the deadline. It did not say whether the plan might be revived.

The change of course averted a possible scuffle with Washington. Top U.S. officials had protested the plan after it was imposed abruptly in May, calling it a barrier to trade. Angry Web users circulated online petitions protesting Green Dam, while industry groups warned the software might create computer security problems.

The controversy reflected the conflict between the communist government's desire to control information and China's high-tech ambitions. The country has an increasingly informed, vocal public and tighter links to companies that create urgently needed jobs and tax revenue.

The decision was a "victory for China's civil society," said Li Fangping, a Beijing lawyer who had demanded a public hearing on the plan.

"Many citizens worked together and voiced their opposition to the forced installation of this filtering software and forced the government to at least think more deeply about it," Li said. "We hope now that they will go ahead and completely drop this order."

News of the announcement spread in China quickly via Twitter and the Chinese mini-blogging site Fanfou. Some bloggers said they expect the government to look for a way to carry out Green Dam that attracts less attention.

"They are using the word 'delay,' instead of saying they stopped the plan," said Wen Yunchao, a Chinese blogger who has been among the most vocal critics of Green Dam. "I think that it's possible that at some point in the future the government could still enforce their policy and

install software on personal computers that filters the information people are able to look at. So, I am calling this an intermediary victory."

China's communist government encourages Internet use for education and business, and the country has the biggest population of Web users, with more than 298 million. But authorities try to block access to material deemed obscene or subversive, and Beijing operates the world's most sweeping system of Internet filtering. U.S. companies such as Yahoo Inc., Microsoft Corp. and Google Inc. have cooperated in way or another with government requests to tamp down criticism.

The Green Dam software would raise China's controls to a new level by putting a filter inside each PC. Chinese authorities said it would be needed to shield children from violent and obscene material online.

Analysts who have reviewed the program say it also contains code to filter material the government considers politically objectionable. Separately, a California company claimed that Green Dam contained stolen programming code.

Chinese Web surfers ridiculed Green Dam by saying it would block access to photos of animals and other innocuous subjects. State media reported extensively on the complaints, a rare move. Chinese media usually uncritically support government policy.

Green Dam already is in use in Internet cafes in China and has been installed since the start of this year in PCs sold under a government program that subsidizes appliance sales in the countryside.

Large PC makers such as Toshiba Corp. and Taiwan's Acer Inc. said they were ready to provide Green Dam on disks beginning Wednesday. Industry leaders Hewlett-Packard Co. and Dell Inc. had declined to discuss their plans, possibly waiting for a diplomatic settlement.

Dell spokesman Jess Blackburn said the PC maker is happy with the Green Dam delay. He would not say what Dell had done to prepare for China's deadline.

"We respect the Chinese government's stated goal of protecting children by filtering access to pornography through the Internet," Blackburn said in a statement.

Representatives from U.S.-based technology groups, including the Information Technology Industry Council and the Software & Information Industry Association, were in Beijing trying to stop Green Dam.

"We welcome the delay in implementation of the Green Dam mandate, and we look forward to working closely with the U.S. government to find market-based solutions that enable consumer choice and protect children on the Internet," said John Neuffer, vice president for global policy at the Information Technology Industry Council, which represents companies including Dell, Hewlett-Packard Co. and Apple Inc.

The Green Dam initiative coincided with a tightening of government controls on Internet use. Last week, China's Health Ministry ordered health-related Web sites that carry research on sexually oriented topics to allow access only to medical professionals.

Also last week, the government issued new rules on "virtual currency" used by some game Web sites, saying it cannot be used to purchase real goods.

On Green Dam, the industry ministry sounded a conciliatory note. It promised to "solicit opinions from all parties" in an effort to improve its work.

"I think the cost of the move from trade friction and generally a public relations black eye was becoming pretty clear to the government," said Duncan Clark, chairman of BDA China Ltd., a Beijing research firm. Postponing the filtering rule "gets them out of the scrutiny of the international media and business."

Associated Press Writer Alexa Olesen and Associated Press researcher Bonnie Cao in Beijing and AP Technology Writer Jessica Mintz in Seattle contributed to this report.

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