

US calls on China to revoke Web filter order

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Commerce Secretary Gary Locke looks on at right, as Vice President Joe Biden answers questions during a meeting at Willard & Kelsey Solar Group in Perrysburg, Ohio, Tuesday June 23, 2009. (AP Photo/Madalyn Ruggiero)

(AP) -- Washington is calling on Beijing to revoke an order to personal computer makers to supply Internet-filtering software with every PC, adding to an array of disputes between the major trading partners.

In a letter to Chinese officials, Secretary of Commerce Gary Locke and Trade Representative Ron Kirk said the order might violate China's free-trade commitments and raise security risks for users, Kirk's office said in a statement Thursday.

"China is putting companies in an untenable position by requiring them, with virtually no public notice, to pre-install software that appears to have broad-based censorship implications and network security issues,"

Locke was quoted as saying.

Beijing told manufacturers in May to install "Green Dam Youth Escort" Web-filtering software or supply it on a disk with every PC made beginning July 1 for sale in China. PC makers say they are studying the order.

American officials met last week with Chinese regulators and expressed concern about the effort to censor Internet use and its possible trade impact.

Locke and Kirk's letter raised the possibility that Washington might challenge China's rule in the World Trade Organization. The United States and European Union filed WTO complaints Tuesday accusing China of improperly favoring its domestic industries by restricting exports of industrial raw materials.

Locke and Kirk's letter complained the rule might violate WTO rules because PC makers got too little advance notice and explanation. WTO members are supposed to give companies enough time to comment on proposed regulatory changes.

Chinese officials insist the filtering software is aimed at blocking access to violent or pornographic material online. Chinese Web users have appealed to the government to repeal the order, pointing out that "Green Dam" mistakenly blocks access to online cartoons, pictures of animals and other innocuous subjects.

Researchers at the University of Michigan who studied "Green Dam" say they have found "serious security vulnerabilities due to programming errors" that could allow any Web site a PC user visits to take control of the computer.

"Protecting children from inappropriate content is a legitimate objective, but this is an inappropriate means and is likely to have a broader scope," Kirk said. "Mandating technically flawed Green Dam software and denying manufacturers and consumers freedom to select filtering software is an unnecessary and unjustified means to achieve that objective, and poses a serious barrier to trade."

Washington and Beijing have had a series of technology-related disputes over China's effort to restrict Internet access and use regulation to promote development of Chinese high-tech industry.

Also Thursday, Internet users in China were unable to access search giant Google Inc.'s main Web site or its Chinese service, and the company said it was investigating.

The outage came after the China Internet Illegal Information Reporting Center accused Google of providing links to vulgar and obscene sites. Google said it would do more to stop users in China from accessing pornography.

The outage began late Wednesday and affected Google's main site, its Gmail.com e-mail service and its China-based site, Google.cn. On Thursday, all three were accessible from a computer in Beijing, but users in two other cities said they could not open Google's main site or Gmail.

"We are investigating the matter and hope the service will be restored soon," Google spokesman John Pinette in Hong Kong told The Associated Press.

The Chinese agency that oversees the Internet, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

[China](#) has the world's largest population of Internet users at more than 298 million. The communist government has the world's most extensive Web monitoring and filtering system, and it regularly blocks access to foreign Web sites.

Last year, Beijing ordered foreign sellers of computer security technology to disclose how their products work. Following U.S. protests, the government agreed in April to postpone that for a year. The order still applies to products sold to Chinese government agencies.

On the Net:

U.S. Trade Representative: <http://www.ustr.gov>

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