UN demands removal of China poster at Net event

November 16 2009, By TAREK EL-TABLAWY , AP Business Writer

(AP) -- United Nations officials forced free-speech advocates to take down a poster over its reference to China's Web restrictions at an Internet conference focused on freedom, saying Monday that it violated a ban on posters at events organized by the world body.

The OpenNet Initiative, which focuses on Internet freedom around the world, had placed a banner at the Internet Governance Forum mentioning China's censorship of the Web. U.N. officials said an unnamed delegation objected to the poster, and others objected to another flier from the group also relating to China.

"We have a no poster policy, be they commercial or political," Markus Kummer, the forum secretariat's executive coordinator, told The Associated Press.

He said the OpenNet Initiative had been granted a meeting room after officials were unable to accommodate their late request for an exhibition booth at the forum.

The policy exists because "we don't want to turn into a censorship office," he said. "Had they had the booth, that would have been the place to put the poster."

Robert Deibert, one of OpenNet's co-founders, said his staff was instructed to remove it by U.N. officials because of the China references. He said he repeatedly asked to see a copy of the rules

banning such posters at U.N.-sponsored events.

"They did not give us any, only referring to the objections of a member state," Deibert said.

The incident occurred Sunday, the first day of the gathering, which has drawn fire from some advocacy groups because of the choice of Egypt as a venue.

While the Egyptian government, unlike many other Arab governments, does not restrict Web access, advocacy groups say it does police the Internet with a particular focus on political bloggers. Such individuals have faced sharp crackdowns for critical postings.

The theme of this year's forum has been expanding Internet use in emerging markets and developing nations, with a focus on reaching out to the three-quarters of the world's population currently unable to access the Internet - whether because of restrictions, money or other factors such as illiteracy and disabilities.

Participants at the forum have stressed that opening the Net to a broader swath of the world was a key to development and economic growth and have noted that a good deal of the new users are those who access the Web through mobile devices.

That has been the case in Egypt, where there are now over 50 million mobile phone subscribers - people who government officials say may first experience the Web through such devices instead of computers.

Kummer said that the decision to have OpenNet remove the banner was a question of policy and that the U.N. does not want commercial sponsorship at its events. But at the forum, there were several other banners with the names of computer giant HP, as well as Vodafone,

Egyptian [Internet](link) provider LinkdotNet and the state's Egypt Telecom. All were listed as sponsors.

While one of the banners was located squarely in front of the main entrance to the conference, Kummer told the AP he had not been aware of their presence.

OpenNet's Deibert said there were other posters and banners in many of the other meeting rooms.

Citation: UN demands removal of China poster at Net event (2009, November 16) retrieved 17 May 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2009-11-demands-china-poster-net-event.html