

Iranian users having trouble accessing Gmail: Google

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A sign is posted outside of the Google headquarters in Mountain View, California. Google said Wednesday that Iranian users were having trouble accessing Gmail following a report that Iran's telecoms agency had suspended the Internet giant's email service.

Iranian users are having trouble accessing Gmail, Google said Wednesday following a report that Iran's telecommunications agency had permanently suspended the Internet giant's email service.

"We have heard from users in Iran that they are having trouble accessing Gmail," Google said in a statement.

"We can confirm a sharp drop in traffic and we have looked at our own networks and found that they are working properly," the Mountain View, California-based company said.

"Whenever we encounter blocks in our services we try to resolve them as quickly as possible because we strongly believe that people everywhere should have the ability to communicate freely online," Google said.

"Sadly, sometimes it is not within our control," it added.

Google's statement came after The Wall Street Journal reported that Iran's telecommunications agency had announced a permanent suspension of Google's Gmail and planned to roll out a national email service for Iranian citizens.

The Journal quoted an unidentified Iranian official as saying the measure was meant to boost local development of Internet technology and to build trust between people and the government.

The reported move comes on the eve of street marches in Iran marking the 31st anniversary of the Islamic revolution and opposition plans to hold anti-government demonstrations.

Opposition supporters in Iran have used social networking services such as Google-owned YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and other sites in their communications efforts in the past.

The US State Department said it could not confirm the suspension of Gmail but condemned what it called Iranian government efforts to erect "virtual walls."

"While information technologies are enabling people around the world to communicate like never before, the Iranian government seems determined to deny its citizens access to information, the ability to express themselves freely, network and share ideas," State Department spokesman Philip Crowley said.

"Virtual walls won't work in the 21st century any better than physical walls worked in the 20th century," Crowley said in a statement. "The Iranian people are dynamic and determined and will find a way to overcome the obstacles the Iranian government puts in their way."

Opposition supporters have staged a series of protests since the June 12 re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in a vote they claim was massively rigged.

Opposition leaders Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi have urged a large turnout by their supporters on Thursday.

Dozens of people have been killed and hundreds wounded in protests since the presidential election.

In the latest flare-up, eight people died in clashes between police and protesters on December 27 when opposition supporters used the annual Shiite Ashura ceremonies to stage anti-government rallies.

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