

China media accuse Google of violating promises

March 23 2010, By ALEXA OLESEN , Associated Press Writer



A man walks past flowers placed by a Chinese journalist outside the Google China headquarters in Beijing, China, Tuesday, March 23, 2010. Google Inc. stopped censoring the Internet for China by shifting its search engine off the mainland Monday but said it will maintain other operations in the country. The maneuver attempts to balance Google's disdain for China's Internet rules with the company's desire to profit from an explosively growing market. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

(AP) -- China's government reacted testily Tuesday to Google Inc.'s decision to stop censoring its China-based search engine, calling the move "totally wrong" and accusing the company of violating promises.

More than two months after it threatened to shut down Google.cn if it had to continue policing the site, Google made the shift early Tuesday Beijing time. Visitors to Google.cn are automatically redirected to the

Chinese-language service based in Hong Kong, where Google is not legally required to censor searches.

"Google has violated its written promise it made when entering the Chinese market by stopping filtering its searching service and blaming China in insinuation for alleged hacker attacks," an official with the State Council Information Office, a Cabinet office that oversees the Internet, said in a statement carried by the official Xinhua News Agency.

"This is totally wrong. We're uncompromisingly opposed to the politicization of commercial issues, and express our discontent and indignation to Google for its unreasonable accusations and conducts," said the official, who was with the office's Internet bureau but not further identified.

The Hong Kong page heralded the shift Monday. "Welcome to Google Search in China's new home." The site also began displaying search results in the simplified Chinese characters used in mainland China.

The move, in effect, shifts the responsibility for censoring from Google and to the communist government, which operates an extensive monitoring and [filtering system](#) to block content deemed unacceptable. Users in China were unable to retrieve searches on sensitive topics.

In Beijing, a few Chinese passers-by laid flowers or chocolates on a large metal "Google" sign outside the company's office. A large gathering of some of Google's 600 staff was held in a first floor cafeteria. Google spokeswoman Jessica Powell said the meeting was called to update staff about the situation, but she declined to give details.

"We haven't worked out all the details so we can't ever rule out letting people go but we very much want to avoid that," said Powell. "The sales presence to a certain degree could depend on the success of

google.com.hk."

Much uncertainty remains about Google's operations in China. While the search engine was shifted to Hong Kong, Google.cn's map service and a free, advertising-supported music portal remain in China. Research and sales divisions remain, for the time being. Google's Gmail e-mail service was still accessible from within China, as was its news page, though attempts to call up specific articles on China were blocked.

It's unclear whether Google cleared the moves with the government or gave any notice of the changes. The Chinese government could retaliate by blocking access to Google's services, much as it has completely shut off YouTube, Facebook and Twitter. China has an estimated 350 million Internet users.

The State Council official said the government talked to Google twice to try to resolve the standoff and suggested that China's laws requiring Web sites to censor themselves was nonnegotiable.

"We made patient and meticulous explanations on the questions Google raised ... telling it we would still welcome its operation and development in China if it was willing to abide by Chinese laws, while it would be its own affair if it was determined to withdraw its service," the official said.

"Foreign companies must abide by Chinese laws and regulations when they operate in China."

The withdrawal of its search engine makes Google the latest foreign Internet company to founder in a China market that is heavily regulated and prone to particular consumer tastes. Companies such as Yahoo, EBay and Microsoft's MSN instant messaging service have never gained the traction in the China market that their homegrown rivals do.

In anticipation of Google's move, Chinese state media cranked up the criticism of Google in recent days in a coordinated assault apparently aimed at swaying public opinion against the U.S. search engine giant as it debates exiting [China](#).

Still the decision is likely to further dismay many Internet-literate Chinese, who admired Google's fight against censorship even though they don't like to be reminded of the government's heavy hand.

"I feel that people will greatly respect Google's action," said Beijing law professor and human-rights lawyer Teng Biao. "China's censorship of the Internet [search engine](#) results is a violation of the most basic of human rights. By doing this, [Google](#) will bring more global attention to China's human rights situation."

"Google's move is also an expression of protest" against the hacking of e-mail accounts, said Teng, who had said after Google's January announcement that someone broke into his Gmail account and forwarded e-mails to another account.

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