Report: China hackers stole key Google program

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Among the losses Google sustained when intruders stole computer information in December was a company treasure: a password system, The New York Times reported Tuesday.

(AP) -- Computer hackers stole a program that controlled access to most of Google Inc.'s services when they attacked the Internet company late last year, according to a report published late Monday.

The story in The New York Times provided more details about an intrusion that provoked a politically charged showdown between Google and China's government over Internet censorship and computer security.

The Times said it obtained the information from an unnamed person with direct knowledge of the investigation into the break-in that Google has traced to China.

Google declined to comment specifically on the Times' story. A spokeswoman reiterated Google's previous assertions that the attacks on the company didn't obtain any personal information from its users' e-mail accounts.

The stolen password system was called Gaia, a reference to the Greek goddess of earth, according to the Times. Besides e-mail, Gaia also governed access to the online services that Google sells to businesses, government agencies and schools.

Without providing specifics, Google acknowledged some of its intellectual property had been stolen when it announced the hacking attacks in January. The heist prompted Google to tighten its computer security.

At least 20 other companies were targeted in similar attacks, according to Google.

The breach incensed Google so much that the company decided to protest the country's laws dictating the censorship of Internet search results deemed to be subversive or pornographic by the government. Google started censoring in China four years ago when it set up a search engine inside of the country to gain better access to the world's largest Web audience.

After unsuccessfully trying to negotiate a compromise with China's ruling party, Google last month began to shift search requests from mainland China to Hong Kong, where online censorship isn't required.

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