

Saudi Arabia orders BlackBerry ban starting Friday

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The new BlackBerry Torch is displayed during a product introduction, Tuesday, Aug. 3, 2010, in New York. (AP Photo/Richard Drew)

(AP) -- Saudi Arabia is ordering its mobile operators to halt BlackBerry services throughout the kingdom this week, heightening tensions between device maker Research in Motion Ltd. and governments demanding greater access to data sent on the phones.

The Saudi state news agency SPA said in a report late Tuesday that the country's telecom regulator has informed mobile service providers in the country that they must halt BlackBerry services starting Friday.

The regulator, known as the Communications and Information

Technology Commission, couldn't immediately be reached for comment to provide details of the ban or say how it would be enforced.

It said the suspension of service was being implemented because BlackBerry service "in its present state does not meet regulatory requirements," according to the SPA report.

RIM could not immediately be reached for comment.

Word of the ban comes just days after the neighboring United Arab Emirates announced it was planning to shut down e-mail, messaging and Web browsing on BlackBerrys starting in October.

India is also in talks with RIM over how information is managed on the devices. Like the UAE, it has cited security concerns in pushing for greater access to encrypted information sent by the phones that gets routed through the Canadian company's computers overseas.

Saudi Arabia did not spell out its concerns about the devices, though its government is also wary of security threats. As in the UAE, Saudi BlackBerry phones are popular both among businesspeople and youth who see the phones' relatively secure communication features as a way to avoid attention from the authorities.

Earlier on Tuesday, RIM denied that it had agreed to heightened surveillance of its corporate clients by the Indian government, as talks continue over access to e-mails and other data sent on the devices.

"We won't compromise on the security architecture of our corporate e-mails," said RIM's India spokesman, Satchit Gayakwad. "We respect the requirements of regulatory bodies in terms of security, but we also look at the customer's need for privacy."

India's internal security chief U.K. Bansal told reporters last week he hoped the issue of BlackBerry monitoring would be sorted out soon, after widespread reports that the government had threatened to ban the devices.

Analysts say RIM's expansion into fast-growing emerging markets - and the UAE's recent public showdown with the company - is threatening to set off a wave of regulatory challenges, as RIM's commitment to information security rubs up against the desires of local law enforcement.

RIM has said its discussions with the more than 175 countries where it operates are private. Gayakwad did say, however, that the Indian government has other ways of cracking data if security concerns arise. It can rifle through an Indian company's e-mail server, for instance, or monitor phone calls, text messages or Web-based e-mails sent from Blackberry devices.

India and the UAE aren't alone in wanting more control over BlackBerry messaging. Bahrain has threatened to crack down on spreading news using the devices. And industry experts say they believe RIM offered China some concessions before the BlackBerry was introduced there.

"Clearly to acquiesce to the service's launch ... the (Chinese) government has had to reach its own comfort level regarding security concerns," said Duncan Clark, chairman of BDA China Ltd., a technology industry research firm in Beijing. "What precisely that involves we can only speculate."

RIM issued a statement Tuesday denying it has given some governments access to BlackBerry data.

"RIM cooperates with all governments with a consistent standard and the

same degree of respect," the company said. "Any claims that we provide, or have ever provided, something unique to the government of one country that we have not offered to the governments of all countries, are unfounded."

RIM said its technology does not allow it, or any third party, to read encrypted e-mails sent by corporate BlackBerry users. (The consumer version has a lower level of security.)

The mounting regulatory pushback has prompted concern from the U.S. and advocacy groups.

U.S. State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley called the UAE's action "a move in the wrong direction."

"It's not about a Canadian company. It's about what we think is an important element of democracy, human rights, and freedom of information and the flow of information in the 21st century," Crowley told reporters Monday.

Arvind Ganesan, who follows business issues at Human Rights Watch, urged RIM to be clearer about the standards it has for dealing with national governments, and what types of data access arrangements have been agreed.

"Governments throughout the world are trying to get at personal information for a variety of reasons," he said. "There have to be real safeguards in place to ensure governments don't use this for nefarious purposes."

The UAE's telecommunications regulator did not respond to a request for comment Tuesday.

Yousef al-Otaiba, the Emirates' ambassador to the U.S., has said the UAE is exercising its sovereign right and wants RIM to comply with its regulations, just as it does with laws in the U.S. and other countries.

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