UAE: BlackBerry crackdown will affect visitors too

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In this Nov. 30, 2009 file photo, a man talks on his smart phone at the Dubai Financial Market in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. The UAE said Sunday, Aug. 1, 2010 it will block key features on BlackBerry smart phones, citing national security concerns because the devices operate beyond the government's ability to monitor their use. Officials in neighboring Saudi Arabia indicated it planned to follow suit. (AP Photo/Kamran Jebreili, File)

(AP) -- The United Arab Emirates' looming crackdown on BlackBerry services will extend to foreign visitors using roaming, putting the government's concerns over the smart phones in direct conflict with the country's ambitions to be a business and tourism haven.

The Emirates' telecoms regulator said Monday that travelers to the city-state of Dubai and the important oil industry center of Abu Dhabi will - like the 500,000 local subscribers - will have to do without BlackBerry e-

mail, messaging and Web services starting in October.

Emirati authorities say the move is based on security concerns because BlackBerry data is automatically shipped to company computers abroad, where it is stored and difficult for local authorities to monitor for illegal activity or abuse. Critics of the crackdown say it is also a way for the country's conservative government to further control content they deem politically or morally objectionable. The handsets themselves will still be allowed.

About 100,000 travelers pass through Dubai's airport every day, making it the busiest in the Middle East. The new restrictions could leave time-pressed business travelers hurrying through, many of them changing planes for other destinations, without access to their e-mail or the Web.

"I think it's a very big step back. All developed countries in the world have it. Why should we not?" said Emirati BlackBerry user Maisoon al-Iskandarani, 24, who works at an international bank in Dubai. "How are you going to stay in touch with your clients and colleagues?"

Device maker Research in Motion Ltd. said it "respects both the regulatory requirements of government and the security and privacy needs of corporations and consumers," but does not disclose details of discussions with regulators in any of the more than 175 countries where it operates. The company defended its security system as "widely accepted by security conscious customers and governments around the world."

The UAE contends some BlackBerry features operate outside the country's laws, "causing judicial, social and national security concerns." At the heart of their concerns is the way the devices handle data, which is encrypted and routed through RIM's servers overseas. Analysts say that makes messages sent by BlackBerry far more difficult, if not

impossible, for authorities to monitor than data which passes solely through domestic computers.

The smart phones enjoy a following not only among the region's professionals, but also among tech-savvy youth who see their relatively secure communication channels as a way to avoid unwanted government attention.

The Telecommunication Regulatory Authority had left the question of phones run by foreign operators unanswered in announcing the ban, which is due to take effect Oct. 11.

But in an e-mailed response to questions from The Associated Press, the regulator said the service suspension would apply to all users in the country, including visitors using roaming services on foreign BlackBerry phones.

"Roaming for BlackBerry Messenger, BlackBerry e-mail and BlackBerry Web browsing will also be suspended," the TRA said in its unsigned e-mail. "They won't be able to use the mentioned services in (the) UAE as it's suspended (in) the country."

That would put BlackBerry services out of reach for business travelers and others passing through the busy Mideast airport hub of Dubai, which handled 40.9 million passengers last year.

Dubai is a major commercial center, hosting the Mideast's biggest port, and has emerged as the region's financial capital and a popular tourist destination.

Its image as an easy place to do business has been tarnished, however, by a credit crisis that has left the emirate more than $100 billion in debt. Residents fear the BlackBerry crackdown won't help.

"Dubai as it is doesn't have a good reputation right now. Do you really want to add to that, so people say 'even technology-wise they're behind?'" al-Iskandarani said. "If anything, they should bring in extra services."

The UAE's other six emirates increasingly rely on foreign visitors too. The UAE federation's capital Abu Dhabi, while less well-known abroad than its flashier neighboring emirate Dubai, is building ties with multinational firms, actively promoting tourism and investing heavily in its own aviation sector.

Smaller emirates, such as Ras al-Khaimah in the north of the country, are also trying to entice foreign businesses to set up shop.

Emirati regulators say they decided to suspend the BlackBerry data services until they can find "an acceptable solution" that addresses the government's concerns - suggesting a deal could still be reached before the ban goes into effect.

"We will reconsider if a solution in line with UAE telecommunications has been provided," the regulator said in its e-mailed response to questions Monday.

The UAE has singled out BlackBerry devices for scrutiny before.

Last year, RIM criticized a directive by the UAE state-owned mobile operator Etisalat telling the company's BlackBerry users to install software described as a service upgrade. Tests showed the download actually installed spy software on users' phones that could allow authorities to access private information stored on the handsets. It strongly distanced itself from Etisalat's decision and told users how to remove the software.

Telecommunication officials in Saudi Arabia have also said they are planning to curtail use of the BlackBerry messaging service, but not other services on the phones. Other countries, including India and the Gulf state of Bahrain, have also raised concerns about BlackBerry messaging features, but have not blocked them outright.

Questions and answers about UAE's BlackBerry ban

Some questions and answers about the United Arab Emirates banning the use of BlackBerry's messaging and Web services:

Q: What is being banned?

A. E-mail, messaging and Web services on BlackBerry phones, starting in October. The ban also applies to foreign visitors using roaming, but not to phone calls.

Q: Why is the United Arab Emirates banning BlackBerry e-mails?

A: In short, the corporate version of the BlackBerry system is too hard to eavesdrop on. The e-mails and messages are encrypted while in transit, and even Research In Motion Ltd., the Canadian company that makes the BlackBerry, doesn't have the keys to decrypt them. The system is designed to keep corporate and government secrets safe, but the UAE is concerned that it could provide cover for illegal activity.

Q: Aren't BlackBerry e-mails accessible to governments anyway?

A: Possibly, but not in a fast, easy way. The e-mails exist in decrypted form on corporate servers, but those may be overseas, and it takes time to get access to them through a legal process with warrants. RIM stresses that governments can satisfy national security and law enforcement needs without compromising commercial security requirements.

Q: Why doesn't RIM give the UAE what it wants?

A: The company hasn't said, but it's likely that RIM doesn't want to give any government wholesale access to e-mails. BlackBerry users wouldn't trust the system to keep commercial secrets safe.

Q: Why is the UAE singling out the BlackBerry? Aren't there other ways to communicate without a risk of eavesdropping?

A: The BlackBerry may be targeted because it is popular and provides security in an easy, prepackaged way. Also, the e-mails travel through RIM's system overseas, even if sent between two BlackBerry users in the UAE. But it shares these features with Google Inc.'s Gmail, which is also likely to store e-mails overseas and is difficult to intercept if used in a Web browser. Corporations inconvenienced by the ban may be able to find adequate security from some other wireless e-mail system the UAE hasn't gotten around to banning.

Q: Could other countries follow suit?

A: Saudi Arabia has already said it would do the same, starting later this month. India has complained about the BlackBerry system before, but a newspaper there, The Economic Times, reports that the government is looking at negotiating a solution.

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