

WikiLeaks says was denial-of-service attack victim

November 29 2010

(AP) -- The online website WikiLeaks on Sunday blamed the temporary outage of its site on a denial-of-service attack by unknown hackers trying to prevent its release of hundreds of thousands of classified U.S. State Department documents.

WikiLeaks said on Twitter early Sunday that its website was "under a mass distributed denial of service attack" but promised that Spain's El Pais, France's Le Monde, Germany's Der Spiegel, Britain's Guardian newspaper and The New York Times "will publish many US embassy cables tonight, even if [WikiLeaks](#) goes down." WikiLeaks had given the media outlets prior access to the diplomatic cables to publish in conjunction with their Sunday release on its site.

There was no reason to doubt WikiLeaks' claim; the website was inaccessible for much of Sunday, though several hundred cables were posted on its site by late afternoon. The cables, many of them classified, offer candid, sometimes unflattering assessments of foreign leaders, ranging from U.S. allies such as Germany and Italy to other nations like Libya, Iran and Afghanistan.

In a typical [denial-of-service attack](#), remote computers commandeered by rogue programs bombard a website with so many data packets that it becomes overwhelmed and unavailable to visitors. Pinpointing the culprits is impossible because the Internet's structure does not allow for the tracing back of the data packets used in such attacks, computer security expert Bruce Schneier told The Associated Press on Sunday.

Hackers have used denial-of-service attacks over the years to target corporate and [government](#) websites.

Last month political bloggers in Vietnam said they were victimized by cyberattacks designed to block their websites to stifle government dissent. Other targets have included U.S. and South Korean government websites in 2009 and [computer networks](#) in Estonia, which were crippled for nearly three weeks in 2007 by what were believed to be Russian hackers.

In the weeks leading up to the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, Georgian government and corporate websites were hit with denial-of-service attacks. The Kremlin denied involvement.

James Lewis, a cybersecurity expert and a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said it's unlikely the U.S. or some other government would use denial-of-service attacks against WikiLeaks.

His best guess is it's "a bunch of geeks who've decided they're annoyed with WikiLeaks."

"Denial of service is usually the amateur's approach," he told the AP on Sunday. "Usually it's the hacker community ..."

Lewis said he's never heard of the U.S. trying to attack a website like this.

"Usually they're more interested in exploiting, that is getting into WikiLeaks to figure out what's going on. Or they're interested in doing some kind of damage, and denial of service really doesn't do any damage."

Such an attack would only stall WikiLeaks, not prevent the information from being released.

Schneier also said he seriously doubts any U.S. government agency would be involved in such an attack because it amounts to a mere "nuisance" and could not stop Wikileaks from releasing the diplomatic cables. He notes that there are many ways to distribute information online.

An encrypted file that was made available online using BitTorrent file-sharing technology in late July is believed to hold the cables. All Wikileaks would need to do to unlock the file is distribute the key.

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