

Google threatens to shut down Swiss Street View

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Attendees crowd the convention floor at the Google IO Developers Conference in San Francisco, Tuesday, May 10, 2011. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)

(AP) -- Google is threatening to wipe photographs of streets and houses in Switzerland from its online maps unless the country's supreme court overturns a ruling requiring an absolute guarantee of anonymity for people captured by the popular Street View service.

Shutting down Street View in an entire country would be the Internet search giant's most extreme response yet to growing complaints it is violating people's privacy.

The Mountain View, California-based company said Wednesday it will ask the Swiss Federal Tribunal to throw out a lower court decision that obliged it to ensure all faces and vehicle license plates

are blurred before uploading pictures to the Street View service. Street Views allows map users to click on virtually any spot in a city to zoom into a series street-level pictures taken by cars mounted with 360-degree cameras.

The ruling last month by the Federal Administrative Court in Bern - following a complaint from the country's privacy watchdog - ordered Google to obscure identifying features such as skin color and clothing from people photographed in the vicinity of "sensitive establishments," such as women's shelters, retirement homes, prisons, schools, courts and hospitals.

If Google fails at the higher court and goes through with its threat, it would be the first time that the company has permanently switched off Street View anywhere in the world, though it has faced privacy concerns in many of the 27 countries where the service is available.

Last year, it bowed to demands for users in Germany to be able to blur entire houses in Street View. And in March the company received a euro100,000 (US\$143,570) fine in France because the cars used to take photographs for Street View had illegally collected personal data from Wi-Fi networks, something it has apologized for.

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