

Internet expert criticizes Indian cyber blockades

August 24 2012, by MUNEEZA NAQVI

(AP)—The Indian government's attempts to block social media accounts and websites that it blames for spreading panic have been inept and possibly illegal, a top Internet expert said Friday.

Earlier this month, thousands of people from the country's remote northeast began fleeing cities in southern and western India, as rumors swirled that they would be attacked in retaliation for ethnic violence against Muslims in their home state.

Last weekend, the government said the rumors were fed by gory images—said to be of murdered Muslims—that were actually manipulated photos of people killed in cyclones and earthquakes. Officials said the images were spread to sow fear of revenge attacks.

After that, the government began interfering with hundreds of websites, including some Twitter accounts, blogs and links to certain news stories. The government also ordered telephone companies to sharply restrict mass text messages.

It is unclear who has been spreading the inflammatory material. Experts say that despite the government's electronic interference, there are many ways to access the blocked sites.

"The government has gone overboard and many of its efforts are legally questionable," said Pranesh Prakash, who studies Internet governance and freedom of speech at The Center for Internet and Society, a research

organization in the southern city of Bangalore.

The center has published a list of more than 300 Internet links blocked in the last two weeks. These include some pages on Facebook, YouTube and news items on the sites of Al Jazeera, Australia's ABC, and a handful of Indian and Pakistani news sites.

On Friday, the Twitter account of Milind Deora, India's junior communications minister, appeared blocked. A message at his (at)milinddeora account said "the profile you are trying to view has been suspended."

Deora told the Press Trust of India news agency that his account was being verified and was only temporarily suspended. PTI said Deora had been tweeting in defense of the government blocking efforts before the account was suspended.

The exodus of people from the northeast followed clashes in Assam state over the last several weeks between ethnic Bodos and Muslims settlers. At least 80 people were killed in that violence and 400,000 were displaced. Most of those who fled were living in Bangalore, where text messages spread quickly threatening retaliatory attacks by Muslims.

The Bodos and the Muslim settlers—most of whom arrived years ago from what was then East Pakistan, and which is now Bangladesh—have clashed repeatedly over the decades. But the recent violence was the worst since the mid-1990s.

"The government's highest priority should have been to counter the rumors and it did a really bad job of that," said Prakash, adding that the government should have at least tried to counter the panic through the same social media sites that it was blocking.

The government's actions have sparked outrage on social networking sites, with hashtags critical of the government quickly becoming top trending topics on Twitter's India site.

But Prakash was as dismissive of that reaction as he was of the government attempts at censorship.

The government's actions reek of "the kind of incompetence one has come to expect," he said, "but the hashtags (hash)Emergency2012 etc. suffer from a lack of perspective, too."

Kapil Sibal, the senior minister of communications and information technology, said in a statement that Facebook and Google were cooperating with the government and shutting down some sites that the government had pointed out as objectionable. Sibal said Twitter had also said it was ready to talk with the government.

But he said that "the accusations that we are aggressively targeting someone's account or websites are incorrect."

On Thursday, Victoria Nuland, spokeswoman for the U.S. State Department, had told reporters that it was urging the Indian government "to take into account the importance of freedom of expression in the online world" while addressing its security concerns. She said the U.S. was ready to help India's efforts to talk to social networks regarding the issue."

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Citation: Internet expert criticizes Indian cyber blockades (2012, August 24) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-08-internet-expert-criticizes-indian-cyber.html>

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