

# Myanmar denies hacking journalist email accounts

February 11 2013

---

(AP)—Myanmar's government denied on Monday that it was behind a possible attempt to hack into the email accounts of journalists working for foreign and local media who Google warned might have been the targets of "state-sponsored attackers."

At least 12 reporters, including a Yangon-based correspondent for The Associated Press, received messages from Google last week when they tried to access their Gmail accounts. The messages said hackers "may be attempting to compromise your account or your computer."

A spokesman for Google, Taj Meadows, confirmed the company issues such warnings to protect users. But he said he could not disclose how Google knows the activity is "state-sponsored" without giving away information that would help attackers avoid detection.

Meadows said users in other countries have also received similar warnings since the company began issuing them in June, but he declined to specify which ones or say which state was behind the recent alleged hacking attempts.

Myanmar presidential spokesman Ye Htut called on Google to identify those responsible "because the vague reference to state-sponsored attackers hurts the image of the government."

"There is no state-sponsored attack on individual accounts," said Ye Htut, who is also the nation's deputy information minister. "That's not a

policy of our government."

Ye Htut said he also received one of hacking warnings on his own [Gmail account](#) on Monday, about one week after most of the Myanmar [journalists](#) received theirs. He posted a screen photo on his Facebook page to back up the claim.

Google's warnings spooked journalists in Myanmar, and raised concerns about the status of newfound press freedoms in a country that until recently was considered one of the most censored in the world. For decades, journalists in Myanmar were subjected to routine state surveillance, telephone taps and [censorship](#) so intense that independent newspapers could not even publish on a daily basis.

Many of those restrictions were eased drastically after President Thein Sein's administration took power two years ago. Over the last year, his government has significantly relaxed media controls, abolishing an official policy of censorship and allowing reporters to print material that would have been unthinkable during the previous era of absolute military rule, such as photographs of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

However, reporters complain that the harsh laws which enabled the government to jail them remain on the books, and old misgivings linger. Some local journalists keep separate [email accounts](#) for dealing with the government, for fear their sources may be compromised.

The reporters who received the recent hacking warnings from [Google](#) include Burmese correspondents for Agence France-Presse, Reuters and Kyodo News. Journalists working for Yangon-based The Voice Weekly and the Eleven Media Group also received the warnings, as did Thailand-based author Bertil Lintner, who has written extensively on Myanmar.

Author and government adviser Thant Myint-U said on his Facebook

page that he had received the same message last week.

"It's difficult to pinpoint which group has done that, but it is very obvious that those who did that do not appreciate freedom of expression and the democratic reform process in the country," said Wai Phyo, chief editor at Eleven Media's Weekly Eleven news journal. "We can only assume that some of them could be from the military."

The Gmail warnings have prompted speculation that the hacking attempt could be related to critical recent coverage of fighting in northern Kachin state, where government forces have launched aggressive artillery attacks against ethnic rebels. The government has complained publicly that coverage of the conflict has been one-sided.

"Targeting the media for not reporting what they like is not a good sign," said Kyaw Min Swe, chief editor of The Voice Weekly. "Our security concerns are high and every journalist must be alert to this."

[Myanmar](#) has seen a rash of hacking attempts recently. The Voice Weekly's Facebook page has been disabled by a hacker since Feb. 4, and the website and Facebook page of Eleven Media were also hacked, journalists at those organizations said.

But the apparent cyberwar has gone both ways. The website of the president's office was shut down briefly last week by hackers, and Ye Htut said the attack was traced to an Asian country, though it remains unclear who was responsible.

Last month, both The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal reported that their computer systems had been infiltrated by China-based hackers. In both cases they said the focus was on monitoring news coverage and the reporters digging into stories the Chinese government deemed important.

Media organizations with bureaus in China have believed for years that their computers, phones and conversations were likely monitored on a fairly regular basis by the Chinese. The Gmail account of an Associated Press staffer was broken into in China in 2010.

Copyright 2013 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.

Citation: Myanmar denies hacking journalist email accounts (2013, February 11) retrieved 7 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-02-myanmar-denies-hacking-journalist-email.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.