Facebook rebuffs UN team request on Somali pirates

July 30 2013, by Jason Straziuso

United Nations investigators hoped they would get some help from Facebook when they asked to see information on suspected pirates operating in Somalia. But Facebook refused.

A report by the U.N. Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea this month pointed out that while many private companies helped in the group's investigative work on matters such as piracy, al-Qaida-linked militants and government corruption, Facebook provided no such assistance.

"Despite repeated official correspondence addressed to Facebook Inc., it has never responded to Monitoring Group requests to discuss information on Facebook accounts belonging to individuals involved in hijackings and hostage-taking," the report said.

Facebook said in a statement Tuesday that the U.N. group had no legal authority to demand data from the company. "We therefore declined their request and referred them to law enforcement authorities," the company said in an e-mailed statement.

Facebook's refusal to share information with U.N. investigators comes as reverberations continue from the disclosure by Edward Snowden, a former contractor for the National Security Agency, that the NSA has cooperated with companies as Yahoo, Google and Facebook to access emails, video chats and pictures. U.S. officials have said the program is narrowly focused on foreign targets, and technology companies say they

turn over information only if required by court order.

"Facebook has faced such pressures relating to privacy and the use of account information in various jurisdictions, even just for marketing purposes, that I would expect them to be very cautious about sharing personal information even with a U.N. Monitoring Group," said Matt Bryden, a former coordinator of the Somalia monitoring group.

The nearly 500-page U.N. report said that investigations have confirmed that numerous piracy facilitators "are interlinked through various communication channels and employ social network services, such as Facebook."

In any case, two Somali pirates who spoke to The Associated Press said pirates don't use social networks for piracy work.

"There are more personal accounts than general ones for the pirates," said Bile Hussein, a Somali pirate commander in Gracad, a pirate base in central Somalia by phone. "We use emails for deals."

"Many of us keep our distance away from the Internet to avoid getting tracked or captured," said another pirate, Hassan Abdi.

The U.N. Monitoring Group would have been interested in access to non-public phone numbers and email addresses that might be listed on Facebook accounts, or to see what "friends" a pirate might have, said Bryden, now the director of Sahan Research, a think tank focusing on peace and security in the Horn of Africa

A page in Facebook's "Safety Center" titled "Information for Law Enforcement Authorities" says that a valid subpoena in connection with a criminal investigation is required to compel the disclosure of basic subscriber records. If a matter could result in the imminent harm of a

child or risk of death or serious injury, a law enforcement official is asked to contact Facebook.

The U.N. Monitoring Group does not have subpoena power. Bryden said international companies often resist, at least at first, assisting the U.N. group because the companies aren't familiar with its work or authority.

"All it has is the force of the Security Council mandate that requests all member states and private entities ... to assist the Monitoring Group's efforts, so cooperation varies considerably," Bryden said.

Bradley Shear, a Washington D.C.-based lawyer who runs a blog focusing on social media law, noted that Facebook frequently cooperates with U.S. law enforcement officials investigating issues surrounding child safety, but he speculated that Facebook may be reluctant to help a U.N. body because the U.N. is trying to become involved with Internet regulation.

Shear said Facebook is not likely to be legally culpable just because Somali pirates or members of al-Shabab use their social media platforms.

"In general, absent knowledge that illegal activity is occurring on your platform, social/digital media platforms have little legal liability for the illegal activity that is occurring on their websites," Shear wrote in an email. "However, there is a growing trend to hold social media/digital media operators accountable for the illegal content/activity on their websites if they turn a blind eye towards it."

Social media use by al-Shabab militants in Somalia is common. Twitter shut down the account of an al-Shabab spokesman earlier this year after the micro-blogging site was used to post a hostage video and death threat, posts that violated Twitter's terms of service.

A new Twitter handle that the U.N. Monitoring group believes is run by a British member of al-Shabab opened a short time later and remains in use.

Citation: Facebook rebuffs UN team request on Somali pirates (2013, July 30) retrieved 25 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2013-07-facebook-rebuffs-team-somali-pirates.html