

# Belgian phone firm hacked; suspected spy attack (Update)

September 16 2013, by Juergen Baetz

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Belgium's main phone operator said Monday its systems have been hacked in what the government described as a suspected incident of cyber-espionage.

Initial information points toward a sophisticated system of intrusion not for sabotage purposes but for "strategic information gathering" with the technology used suggesting "a high-level involvement by another country," Belgian Prime Minister Elio di Rupo said in a statement.

Belgacom said its teams of experts found "traces of a digital intrusion in the company's internal IT system" but restored the system's integrity over the weekend. The company said it currently has no indication of any impact on its customers or their data. It has filed a complaint with federal prosecutors against an unknown third party.

Neither the government nor Belgacom commented on whom they suspected was behind the spying attack, citing the ongoing judicial investigation. Still, the incident came only weeks after reports based on material leaked by Edward Snowden which claimed that U.S. surveillance agencies were eavesdropping on European Union institutions based in Brussels.

The European Commission, the 28-nation bloc's executive arm, at that moment said it was seeking clarification from the U.S. government.

Earlier this month new allegations based on Snowden's trove of

documents surfaced suggesting the Belgium-based Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication, an organization better known as SWIFT that oversees international bank transfers thought to be secure transactions, were also targeted by the NSA.

The EU Commission, again, reacted by saying it had asked an explanation from Washington. If proven true, the EU has since threatened it would consider scrapping a treaty that allows the U.S. government access to some SWIFT data in terrorism-related investigations.

Meanwhile, the extent of the attack on Belgacom wasn't immediately clear. The firm insisted that it didn't know about any negative impact for its customers.

"The virus has only been detected in the internal computer system of Belgacom, not in its telecom network," it said. The company—in which the government holds a majority stake—did not elaborate on the nature of the intrusion.

The government's strong-worded statement calling it a suspected incident of cyber-espionage, however, indicated that the intrusion must have been serious in scale and scope.

"If this hypothesis is confirmed and if this is in fact about cyber-espionage, the government strongly condemns this intrusion and the violation of the public firm's integrity," it said. "In this case the government will take the necessary steps," it said, without elaborating.

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