

Turkey hosts Internet forum, despite online crackdown

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A man looks at the YouTube site on a laptop in Istanbul, on March 27, 2014

Turkey has begun hosting a major UN-backed forum on Internet governance, despite sharp criticism that it is one of world's leading offenders on limiting Internet rights.

The Internet Governance Forum (IGF) is an annual meeting set up by the United Nations that aims to bring together government, activists and

business to discuss how to regulate and encourage use of the Internet worldwide.

"We need to spread knowledge and share the benefits of the Internet through bridging the digital divide," said UN Assistant Secretary General Thomas Gaas as the four-day meeting opened.

He said the forum strived to help government officials and civil society "to better access the benefits of the Internet for all."

Yet the choice of Istanbul as the venue for the meeting has been highly contentious, given Turkey's own patchy record on Internet freedoms which included brief bans on YouTube and Twitter this year.

The authorities led by then prime minister—now President—Recep Tayyip Erdogan were widely condemned for cracking down on the Internet in the wake of last year's anti-government protests.

"I think the advantage of an event like this is really a wake up call to Turkey that if it wants to be part of a group of nations that respects Internet freedom and freedom of expression it's really got to change its ways and very quickly," Andrew Gardner, of Amnesty International, told AFP.

He pointed to the case of 29 people on trial in the western city of Izmir over Tweets posted during last year's protests that are claimed to have incited followers to break the law.

"It should be seen as a warning signal to the thousands of others who use the social networks to share their ideas and opinions," he said.

But he said that Turkey was by far from the worst offender when it came to Internet freedom, noting the record of Iran and China.

The office of EU Commission Vice President and digital technology commissioner Neelie Kroes, who is attending the forum, said she would be pushing Turkish officials for greater media freedoms and pluralism.

"I want the people of Turkey to enjoy the freedom and prosperity they deserve," she said in a speech in Istanbul earlier Tuesday.

"More than ever it is clear that the Internet makes it much harder to censor and repress. Governments are increasingly powerless to prevent the free exchange of ideas," she said.

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