

Thai government websites crash in 'symbolic act' by censorship critics: officials

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Several Thai government websites temporarily crashed due to a "symbolic act" by people against plans to introduce a single Internet gateway, officials said Thursday, a measure critics say will make it easier for the ruling junta to censor the web.

A minister stopped short of describing the incident as a cyber attack but said that it was triggered by those opposed to the proposal, dubbed by some online as the "Great Firewall of Thailand"—a play on China's draconian Internet censorship programme.

The Ministry of Information and Communication Technology's (ICT) website went down for more than two hours on Wednesday evening after it was "overcrowded" by the number of users, ICT deputy permanent secretary Somsak Khaosuwat, told AFP.

"There were several other government websites which faced similar problems," he said, adding access to the sites had been restored by Thursday morning.

Tens of thousands of people have signed a petition against plans to introduce a single Internet gateway for Thailand to make it easier to monitor the web and block content.

By Thursday afternoon more than 132,000 people had signed a petition on Change.org calling on the government to abandon the proposal, while the state websites that had crashed appeared to be running but more slowly than usual.

At a press conference earlier ICT minister Uttama Savannaya said traffic on the ministry's website exceeded capacity, reaching 100,000 on Wednesday, causing it to crash.

"It was a symbolic act by people concerned about the single Internet gateway. We do not think they aimed to attack [government websites](#)," he told reporters in Bangkok.

Internet gateways are the points on a network where a country connects to the worldwide web.

Initially Thailand's Internet flowed through a single gateway owned by the government.

But the sector was deregulated in 2006, allowing dozens of companies to open their own access points—resulting in dramatically increased Internet speeds and Thailand emerging as a regional IT hub.

The junta which seized power in a coup last year has vowed to expand the country's appeal as a hub, unveiling a plan it has dubbed "The Digital Economy". On Thursday Uttama insisted there would be "no limitation of freedom" under the proposal.

"We will not interfere in the use of Internet or social media," he said.

But the minister added that the Thai premier Prayut Chan-O-Cha, who led last year's coup as then army chief, was concerned about some "inappropriate information" accessed by Thais, particularly teenagers.

Since seizing power Thailand's generals have ramped up censorship, blocking scores of sites and pursuing online critics with criminal charges and so-called "attitude adjustment" sessions.

Critics of the single Internet gateway plan say it will allow the military to further increase censorship as well as leave the country's IT hub status vulnerable if the gateway fails.

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