

Telegram blocks terror content after Indonesia threatens ban

July 16 2017, by Stephen Wright



The messaging app Telegram is displayed on a smartphone, Saturday, July 15, 2017, in Bangkok, Thailand. Indonesia says it's blocking web versions of the Telegram instant messaging app and will block the app completely if it continues to be a forum for radical propaganda and violent militants. (AP Photo)

The encrypted messaging app Telegram is forming a team of moderators who are familiar with Indonesian culture and language so it can remove

"terrorist-related content" faster, its co-founder said Sunday, after Indonesia limited access to the app and threatened a total ban.

Pavel Durov, who with his brother Nikolai founded the app in 2013, said in a message to his 40,000 followers on Telegram that he'd been unaware of a failure to quickly respond to an Indonesian government request to block a number of offending channels—chat groups on the app—but was now rectifying the situation.

The Ministry of Communications and Information Technology said Friday that it was preparing for the total closure of Telegram in Indonesia, where it has several million users, if it didn't develop procedures to block unlawful content. As a partial measure, it asked internet companies in the world's most populous Muslim nation to block access to 11 addresses offering the web version of Telegram.

Samuel Pangerapan, the director general of informatics applications at the ministry, said the app is used to recruit Indonesians into militant groups and to spread hate and methods for carrying out attacks including bomb making.

Suspected militants arrested by Indonesian police recently have told authorities that they communicated with each other via Telegram and received orders and directions to carry out attacks through the app, including from Bahrin Naim, an Indonesian with the Islamic State group in Syria accused of orchestrating several attacks in the past 18 months.

Durov said Telegram has now blocked the channels that were reported to it by the Indonesian government.

"We are forming a dedicated team of moderators with knowledge of Indonesian culture and language to be able to process reports of terrorist-related content more quickly and accurately," he said.

Communications and Information Technology Minister Rudiantara, who goes by one name, said he had received an apology from Durov, who was apparently not aware of several requests from the ministry since 2016.

"I appreciate the response from Pavel Durov and the ministry will follow it up as soon as possible in terms of technical details so that standard operating procedures can be implemented immediately," Rudiantara said.

Indonesia's measures against Telegram come as Southeast Asian nations step up efforts to combat Islamic radicalism following the capture of the southern Philippine city of Marawi by Islamic State group-linked militants.

Nearly two months after the initial assault, Philippine forces are still battling to regain complete control of the city. Experts fear the southern Philippines could become a new base for the IS, including Indonesian and Malaysian militants returning from the Middle East, as an international coalition retakes territory held by the IS in Syria and Iraq.

But the government move sparked a public outcry in Indonesia, with Twitter and Facebook exploding with negative comments and some people reporting they were unable to access the web.telegram.org domain. Indonesians are among the world's biggest users of social media.

The free messaging service can be used as a smartphone app and on computers through a web interface or desktop messenger. Its strong encryption has contributed to its popularity with those concerned about privacy and secure communications in the digital era but also attracted militant groups and other criminal elements.

Durov said Telegram blocks thousands of IS-related channels a month

and is "always open to ideas on how to get better at this."

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