

U.S. calls for fall of Great Firewall

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Lawmakers voiced concern over U.S. Internet companies fostering censorship in China in order to secure a place in the lucrative Chinese market.

But tech companies say its part of the requirements in doing business in the region, but would inform Chinese users of content restrictions while expanding access to information as best they could. Companies testified Wednesday at a joint hearing held by the Subcommittee on Global Human Rights and Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific.

Lawmakers and human rights activists said they remained skeptical, voicing social responsibility as the more important goal.

The hearing follows in the wake of actions by Microsoft, Yahoo Inc., Google Inc. and Cisco Systems Inc., who were criticized by human rights activists for contributing to the effectiveness of the Chinese government's censorship.

"I believe that two of the most essential pillars that prop up totalitarian regimes are the secret police and propaganda," said Rep. Christopher Smith, R-N.J., chairman of the Subcommittee on Global Human Rights in a statement. "Yet for the sake of market share and profits, leading U.S. companies like Google, Yahoo, Cisco and Microsoft have compromised both the integrity of their product and their duties as responsible corporate citizens."

He added, "They have aided and abetted the Chinese regime to prop up both of these pillars, propagating the message of the dictatorship unabated and supporting the secret police in a myriad of ways, including surveillance and invasion of privacy, in order to effectuate the massive crackdown on its citizens."

A longtime human rights supporter, Smith announced he would introduce legislation that would help to bring down the "Great Firewall" by restricting Internet companies from censoring or filtering out political or religious terms despite the

company's business partnerships or local laws with other countries.

He criticized companies for enabling dictatorship.

If legislation talks persist, this could mean that U.S. lawmakers could have a say in freedom of speech via legislation on U.S. Internet technology exports.

But requirements of doing business in China includes self-censorship, remarked Google's Elliot Schrage.

"Understandably, many are puzzled or upset by our decision," Schrage said in his testimony. "But our decision was based on a judgment that Google.cn will make a meaningful -- though imperfect -- contribution to the overall expansion of access to information in China."

According to Schrage, Google found its service in the region experiencing slowness and unreliable due to the large measure of extensive filtering performed by China's licensed Internet Service Providers, therefore, not only were companies dealing with the government but also the ISP's.

Meanwhile, Yahoo's Michael Callahan said that this issue was bigger than for one company or one industry, saying companies must comply with local laws.

"When a foreign telecommunications company operating in the United States receives an order from U.S. law enforcement, it must comply," testified Callahan. "Failure to comply in China could have subjected Yahoo! China and its employees to criminal charges, including imprisonment. Ultimately, U.S. companies in China face a choice: comply with Chinese law, or leave."

But despite rapid growth with as many as 110 million Chinese citizens with access to the Internet, human rights activists say companies have a social responsibility towards the Chinese people.

Among the suggestions included a call for industry wide business standards in IT for operating with repressive regimes, said Sharon Hom, executive director of human rights in China.

"Vague, abstract, inaccurate reference to 'Chinese law' and compliance with domestic law is an indefensible justification for undermining human rights," testified Hom.

Other recommendations included improving rule of law in China as well as helping the country conform to international obligations including human rights, her group suggested.

Reporters Without Borders also testified proposing six ways companies could behave ethically in repressive countries by means of not allowing U.S. companies to host e-mail servers within a repressive country, not incorporating automatic filters that censor protect words, obtain expressive permission of the Department of Commerce in order to sell Internet surveillance technology, and not allowing U.S. companies to locate their host servers within repressive countries, among other recommendations.

"China was one of the first repressive regimes to realize that it couldn't do without the Internet and therefore had to keep it under tight control," testified Reporters Without Borders' Lucie Morillon. "It's one of the few countries that have managed to block all material critical of the regime, while at the same time expanding Internet facilities. How do they do it? Through a clever combination of investment, technology and diplomacy."

The U.S. State Department Tuesday announced plans to establish a task force that would investigate challenges posed by repressive regimes on Internet freedom and make recommendations to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

The task force aims at studying the use of technology to restrict access to political content and impact of such censorship efforts on U.S. companies, the use of technology to track and repress dissidents, and efforts to modify restrictive Internet governance structures.

"We do not believe that technology alone will lead to the Chinese government's allowing its people to enjoy freedom of expression or the political benefits of the free flow of uncensored information," testified Ambassador David A. Gross of the U.S. State Department. "We will continue to make clear that it is not acceptable for the Chinese government to continue to suppress speech on the Internet or to foster a climate of intimidation and persecute dissidents. All the people of China, including the more than 111 million Chinese Internet subscribers, deserve no less."

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