

Google, Skype under scanner in India security crackdown

31 August 2010, by Penny MacRae



A man speaks on his phone nearby a Mumbai BlackBerry phone shop. The country's government has given the company a two-month reprieve on a threat to ban its messaging services, averting a showdown over security access.

BlackBerry may have won a reprieve but Google and Skype were squarely in the firing line Tuesday as India's security agencies widened their crackdown on telecom firms.

India's 1.1 million BlackBerry users heaved a sigh of relief after the government Monday gave the smartphone's manufacturer a two-month window to provide a permanent solution to avert a ban on its corporate message services.

Security forces in India, battling insurgencies ranging from Kashmir in the northwest to the far-flung northeast, are insisting that telecom groups give them the capability to monitor their data.

Skype, the Internet phone service, and Google, which uses powerful encryption technology for its Gmail email service, are expected to be among the next wave of firms to come under New Delhi's scanner.

"If a company is providing telecom services in India then all communications must be available to Indian security services," a spokesman for the

home ministry told AFP.

"If Google or Skype have a component that is not accessible, that will not be possible," he said, asking not to be named in line with standard government procedure in India. "The message is the same for everybody."

Home ministry sources have said in the past that Skype, which uses Voice-Over-Internet-Protocol (VOIP) technology that sends calls over the Internet, poses a difficulty for the domestic intelligence services.

The Press Trust of India news agency reported that notices would be sent to Skype and fellow US Internet giant Google from Tuesday.

"All of them will be asked to comply with the directive or else they will have to close down their networks," a senior official was quoted as saying.

India is also targeting "virtual private networks", which give employees secure access to their company networks when they are working out of the office.

A spokesman for Google, Gaurav Bhaskar, told AFP the company was yet to receive a notice.

"Once we receive it we will be in a better position to comment on what they are looking for," he said, adding that he expected the concern to be the Gmail service.

Skype was unavailable for comment.

The maker of the BlackBerry, Canada's Research in Motion (RIM), has proposed setting up a server in India through which its heavily encrypted corporate messaging service can be routed.

RIM's proposals for "lawful access" to its messages would be "operationalised immediately" and their

feasibility assessed, the home ministry said Monday.

A RIM official told AFP the company had not compromised its public commitment to make no special deals with governments.

Analysts note other security-conscious nations such as China and Russia appear to be satisfied that their intelligence agencies have sufficient access to BlackBerry communications although the arrangements between RIM and these countries are not known.

BlackBerry has also been facing a threatened October 11 ban by the United Arab Emirates and has been negotiating with Saudi Arabia on security issues.

For the Indian government, a ban on BlackBerry services, used widely by India's elite, could have caused serious communication problems with the Commonwealth Games due to take place in New Delhi in just over a month.

Banning the service would have also created disruption for Indian companies, which widely use the Blackberry. RIM has 1.1 million users in India, although not all of them are corporate clients.

"It would have been a real inconvenience, I don't know what I would have done. I use the BlackBerry all the time," said an Indian oil company executive.

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