

MASSIVE INTERNET CENSORSHIP COULD ADD TAJIKISTAN TO “COUNTRIES UNDER SURVEILLANCE”

Access to the leading independent news website Asia-Plus has been blocked for the third time in two months. It was last blocked on 23 July (see below) and had only just been restored when it was blocked again yesterday. Tajikistan’s Internet Service Providers are doing the blocking at the behest of the Communications Agency, which cites “technical reasons.”

The Russian news agency RIA-Novosti’s website has also been blocked, joining YouTube, two other Russian news sites (Lenta.ru and Vesti.ru), two news portals specializing in Central Asia (Fergananews.com and Centrasia.ru) and the local forum Pamir-vesti.ru, all of which have been filtered and blocked in recent days.

Access to the BBC’s website was blocked on 30 July and restored the next day.

“Tajikistan already came close to being added to the list of countries ‘under surveillance’ in our last ‘Enemies of the Internet’ report in March and now the government is clearly doing everything possible to make sure it is added next year, regardless of the negative impact this would have on the country’s image,” Reporters Without Borders said.

“By making increasingly systematic use of cyber-censorship, Tajikistan is falling in line with his Central Asian neighbour Kazakhstan and could eventually catch up with neighbouring Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, which practice even more drastic forms of online censorship.”

The management of Asia-Plus has voiced frustration with the repeated blocking and with the resulting financial losses and damage to its reputation. Its executive director said Asia-Plus would conduct no more negotiations with the head of the Communications Agency, Beg Zuhurov, because the agreements reached in the past had not been respected.

The surge in website blocking coincided with violent clashes between government forces and armed groups in Khorog, the capital of the southern autonomous province of Gorno-Badakhshan, which neighbours Afghanistan. It is very hard to establish the exact situation in Khorog but it seems to have calmed down in the past few days and the army has begun to withdraw.

Dozens of people are thought to have died in the clashes but there is a great deal of variation in the casualty estimates.

25.07.2012 - Access to one of Tajikistan’s main news sites blocked again

Reporters Without Borders deplores the blocking two days ago of access to the news site news.tj, the portal of one of Tajikistan’s biggest independent news organizations Asia Plus, by all Internet service providers on government orders.

“This act of censorship unfortunately is part of the continuing wave of website blockages that we condemned in March,” the press freedom organization said.

“The arbitrary blocking of access to websites by the telecommunications ministry is unacceptable. We urge the government to stop putting pressure on Internet service providers and to restore access to all news sites affected by this mass censorship as soon as possible.”

Access to the Asia Plus website was blocked on the evening of 23 July. The site’s editorial staff were told of the blocking order by its service provider which was responding to a request by Beg Zuhurov, the director of communications, who had given the order to cut access to the site by text message.

Editorial staff say they never received a statement from the government giving the official reasons for the blockage. They made a number of attempts to contact the minister directly without success.

A few days earlier, the site published several articles about a conflict between government forces and rebels in the eastern region of Badakhshan, during which the general in charge of special services, Abdullo Nazarov, was stabbed to death.

It is the second time access to the site has been blocked by the government in the past two months. The previous blockage, which lasted a week, was in response to a comment made by an Internet user. In March this year, access to the sites zvezda.ru, tkjnews.com, maxala.org and centrasia.ru was also blocked.

The government is tightening its control over the Web in the run-up to the presidential election next year.

Last week, the communications ministry informed journalists that a group of IT experts would be formed in the near future to monitor undesirable content. The mission of this “citizens’ organization”, once it is registered with the justice ministry, will be to filter out all comments found to be insulting or defamatory towards those in power.

In this manner, the government hopes forestall the use by Internet users of proxy servers to get around censorship and access the content of blocked sites.

Tajikistan is in 123rd place of 179 countries listed in the 2011-2012 World Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders.

<http://en.rsf.org/tadjikistan-access-to-one-of-tajikistan-s-main-25-07-2012,43109.html>