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AI Index: POL 30/054/2006 (Public)
News Service No: 277
27 October 2006

Embargo Date: 27 October 2006 00:01 GMT

Amnesty International Statement at the opening of the Internet Governance Forum, Athens 2006

The Internet is one of the most powerful inventions of the digital age. It has the potential to empower and educate, to cross cultural boundaries and create global communities. It offers the means for any individual with access to a computer and a gateway to the internet to communicate with others across the world in a free flow of information and ideas – a powerful force for human rights.

But, while the internet has brought freedom of information to millions, for some, it has led to imprisonment by governments that have sought to curtail this freedom. Websites and blogs have been shut down; firewalls built to prevent access to information. Governments have restricted and filtered search engines to keep information from people in their territory.

Amnesty International has documented the failures of governments to respect and protect the rights to freedom of information, expression, association and privacy, and has highlighted the collaboration of businesses in some of these violations.

Yahoo! via its Chinese partner company, Alibaba, has provided the authorities with private and confidential information about its users that has been used to convict and imprison journalists. It has also agreed to censor and deny access to information. Microsoft shut down the blog of New York Times researcher Zhao Jing on the basis of a government request. The company has also admitted that it responds to directions from the Chinese government in restricting users of MSN Spaces from using certain terms. Google has launched a censored version of its international search engine in China.

Recent abuses reported have included imprisoning people for transmitting news and opinions in emails, chat-rooms and on websites, and denying access to information and opinions on the Internet through content removal and filtering of search engines. At particular risk are those who defend the human rights of others.

Chinese journalist Shi Tao used his Yahoo account to email a US-based website about an internal government directive instructing journalists how to handle media coverage of the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square crackdown. He was sentenced to 10 years in prison for "illegally providing state secrets to foreign entities." Yahoo! provided information to the government that was used in his prosecution.

Tunisian lawyer and human rights defender Mohammed Abbou is serving a three and a half year prison

sentence largely for publishing articles critical of the Tunisian authorities on the Internet.

Vietnamese political dissident Truong Quoc Huy was first arrested in October 2005 with two other young people after chatting on a democracy and human rights website. He was held incommunicado for nine months then released, but, on 18 August 2006, he was rearrested in an Internet cafe in Ho Chi Minh City, where he had logged on to a chatroom. His whereabouts remain unknown and no charges have been publicised.

Amnesty International considers Shi Tao, Mohammed Abbou, Truong Quoc Huy and many others to be prisoners of conscience. We are deeply concerned about the participation of both governments and businesses in the repression of fundamental human rights through their control of the Internet.

We bring with us to the Internet Governance Forum the signatures of over 43,000 people who share our concerns and who have signed our pledge for internet freedom:

I believe the Internet should be a force for political freedom, not repression. People have the right to seek and receive information and to express their peaceful beliefs online without fear or interference. I call on governments to stop the unwarranted restriction of freedom of expression on the Internet - and on companies to stop helping them do it.

In the United States, Amnesty International has been supporting domestic legislative efforts to protect freedom of expression and privacy on the Internet, including the recently proposed Global Online Freedom Act, but these efforts will be insufficient to address all states and non-U.S. companies.

All states and all companies must be held to the same standards for upholding and promoting international human rights and humanitarian law, norms and standards.

Every organ of society is responsible for ensuring that human rights are respected and promoted, including business. Any individual or organization defending human rights peacefully and legitimately should be protected.

Amnesty International calls on governments:

- to release immediately and unconditionally all those imprisoned because of the expression online of news and peaceful opinions;

- to cease harassment and threats against people seeking to express, impart or receive information on the Internet;

- to neither restrict nor arbitrarily interfere with the operation and usage of the Internet in ways that violate the fundamental rights to information, freedom of expression and privacy. This includes prior censorship, monitoring and surveillance that does not conform with countries' human rights obligations;

- to align domestic and local law and regulation with international human rights laws, norms and standards.

Amnesty International calls on IT and telecommunications companies:

- to publicly commit to honoring human rights, and develop human rights policies that state a clear commitment to support the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and comply with the requirements of the UN Global Compact;

- to be transparent about any words, phrases or concepts they are filtering or censoring, and the laws under which they are doing this;

- to exhaust all judicial and administrative remedies when faced with requests that would deny a person's right to privacy or free expression;

- to exercise leadership in promoting human rights with governments and to participate with civil society in efforts to promote people's fundamental rights.

Amnesty International looks forward to being a part of the process that will protect human rights on the Internet and ensure that all organs of society live up to their responsibility in promoting and upholding these rights. We are eager to participate in and support any process that stems from this conference that aims to ensure that the Internet is a place where human rights of all people are respected and protected.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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