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China: Internet companies assist censorship

(London/ Davos): Google's launch of a self-censoring Chinese search engine is the latest in a string of examples of global Internet companies caving in to pressure from the Chinese government. The service curtails the rights of Chinese Internet users to the freedom of expression and freedom of information enjoyed in other countries.

Speaking from the World Economic Forum in Davos, Amnesty International's Secretary General Irene Khan said:

"While acknowledging that Google has taken a number of steps to ensure access of Chinese users to the Internet, Amnesty International is nonetheless dismayed at the growing global trend in the IT industry."

"Whether succumbing to demands from Chinese officials or anticipating government concerns, companies that impose restrictions that infringe on human rights are being extremely short-sighted. The agreements the industry enters into with the Chinese government, whether tacit or written, go against the IT industry's claim that it promotes the right to freedom of information of all people, at all times, everywhere."

Last year, Microsoft launched a portal in China that blocks use of words such as 'freedom' in blog text. The company recently closed down the blog of Zhao Jing, who used the blog name Michael An Ti, after he supported a strike against the politically-motivated sacking of an editor at the Beijing News.

Yahoo has admitted revealing email account details of the journalist Shi Tao to the Chinese authorities, who was peacefully exercising his right to impart information, a move that contributed to his prosecution and sentencing to 10 years in prison.

"Agreements between global corporations and the Chinese authorities has entrenched Internet censorship as the norm in China," said Irene Khan. "Internet companies justify their actions on the basis of Chinese regulations. In fact, such agreements and the resulting self-censorship, violate both international standards and China's own constitution, which protects freedom of expression."

International law guarantees the right to freedom of information and the free flow of ideas across borders. While some restrictions on these have been developed over the years, the manner in which IT companies are freely submitting to opaque Chinese policies, is unacceptable.

"The Internet heralded unfettered access to information in a borderless world. Instead, companies are helping governments build borders to prevent their citizens from accessing information," said Irene Khan.

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