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UN General Assembly Takes Step towards ending indiscriminate surveillance and upholding right to privacy

United Nations member states must follow-up on today's call by standing firm against indiscriminate surveillance and respecting individuals' right to privacy, Amnesty International said today as the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly adopted a key resolution on the issue.

The resolution on "The right to privacy in the digital age" constitutes a positive first response by the UN General Assembly to indiscriminate practices such as mass surveillance of modern forms of communications. It builds on the strong stance taken in recent months by top UN officials, including UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay and the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression Frank La Rue.

In addition to domestic surveillance the resolution expresses the General Assembly's deep concern at the negative impact surveillance may have on the human rights of persons located outside a State's borders.

"This is a critical moment for the protection of privacy around the world. Mass surveillance tramples individuals' right to privacy and gravely threatens people's capacity to freely express and share ideas and opinions," said José Luis Díaz Amnesty International representative at the United Nations. "This is true whether the individuals affected are within the borders of the States carrying out such practices or outside".

Brazil and Germany presented the resolution amid a string of revelations about the US and other governments' use of mass surveillance programmes to intercept, collect and monitor communications – both inside and beyond their own borders.

Amnesty International and several other international human rights organizations issued a joint letter to UN member states last week, calling on them to back the draft. "A strong resolution would crucially reiterate the importance of protecting privacy and free expression in the face of technological advancements and encroaching state power", the groups said.

The right to privacy – enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights – is intrinsically linked to freedom of expression and many other rights. Respect of privacy is also of crucial importance to people who use information and communication technologies to communicate sensitive information about human rights violations, such as journalists, lawyers and human rights activists.

“Mass surveillance programmes are serious threats to human rights,” said José Luis Díaz. “States need to take a long, hard look at the practices they’re adopting and have an honest conversation about the risks they’re taking. And they must commit to striking an appropriate balance between privacy and security, one that gives enough weight to the freedoms that are essential to the human spirit.”

The resolution requests the High Commissioner for Human Rights to further look into these issues and report back next year to the UN Human Rights Council and to the General Assembly on the protection and promotion of the right to privacy in the context of domestic and extraterritorial surveillance.

“A comprehensive study on surveillance of domestic and foreign communications and its implications for human rights, such as the right to privacy, provides a good opportunity to reaffirm the importance of striking the right balance between privacy and security,” José Luis Díaz said.

Link: op-ed from 25 October

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/un-response-surveillance-must-strike-balance-between-privacy-and-security-2013-10-25>