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USA: Revelations about government surveillance ‘raise red flags’

New revelations about the alleged reach of the US National Security Agency (NSA)’s surveillance efforts raise serious questions about the US authorities’ respect for the right to privacy, Amnesty International said today.

On Thursday The Washington Post in the USA and The Guardian in the UK reported on the NSA’s alleged ongoing efforts to monitor activities of millions of people both inside the USA and overseas.

This includes accessing information on social media and other internet sites, as well as collecting data from mobile phone call records.

“The sweeping nature of the records allegedly sought by the government and the systems it has reportedly accessed raises red flags about privacy,” said Frank Jannuzi, Deputy Executive Director of Amnesty International USA.

“The onus is always on the government to demonstrate that infringements of the right to privacy are lawful, that they pursue a legitimate goal and are necessary and proportionate.”

According to the media reports, a leaked top secret document revealed that the NSA has obtained direct access to the systems of several US-based internet and tech companies, including Google, Facebook, and Apple.

A previously undisclosed programme called PRISM reportedly gave the NSA access to these systems – allowing officials to collect data including the content of search histories, emails, file transfers and live chats. The reports said the internet companies denied any knowledge of PRISM.

Media reports also separately alleged the existence of a court order requiring the US communications company Verizon to give NSA officials access to metadata about mobile phone records, though not the content of the phone calls.

In a statement released on 6 June, the Director of National Intelligence, James R. Clapper, asserted that The Guardian and The Washington Post reports contained “numerous inaccuracies”. He did not deny the existence of the surveillance programmes.

“Counter-terrorism efforts must not be used as a pretext for the government to pry indiscriminately into private affairs,” said Jannuzi.

“The US government must take all necessary measures to ensure that no one is subject to unlawful or arbitrary interference with his or her privacy.”

The latest reports about surveillance come after the US Supreme Court in February 2013 dismissed an unrelated case challenging expanded government powers to carry out wiretaps without warrants.

In that suit, *Clapper v. Amnesty International USA*, filed in July 2008, Amnesty International and a group of other organizations, lawyers and journalists represented by the American Civil Liberties Union challenged the constitutionality of the FISA Amendments Act of 2008, which expanded the government’s powers of warrantless surveillance.

In February 2013, in a 5-4 decision, the US Supreme Court dismissed the case, finding that the plaintiffs did not have standing to challenge the US government’s wiretapping surveillance.