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UN General Assembly resolution: privacy needs to remain on top of states' agenda

Today, the Third Committee of the United Nations General Assembly adopted by consensus a resolution on "The right to privacy in the digital age". The drafting and negotiations for the resolution were led by Brazil and Germany.

This was the second year the General Assembly considered the issue since the revelations about mass indiscriminate surveillance made by whistleblower Edward Snowden last year. The resolution will go to the General Assembly Plenary for adoption in mid-December.

The resolution emphasises the importance of the right to privacy in the digital age, and calls on states to do more to promote and protect privacy on the Internet and in the context of digital communications. The resolution also recognizes the crucial importance of preserving privacy in the face of ever expanding state surveillance and data collection. The momentum for better protection of privacy achieved at the General Assembly now needs more than ever to be translated into concrete results in countries around the world.

Amnesty International is concerned that in their approach to the resolution, a group of countries, including the 'Five Eyes' (the USA, UK, Australia, Canada and New Zealand) appeared to be more concerned with protecting their surveillance and intelligence sharing practice than protecting human rights. Their statements delivered upon adoption of the resolution suggest that they prevented the Third Committee from fully addressing significant challenges posed by mass surveillance practices.

Nevertheless, Amnesty International believes that the resolution paves the way for positive change in the protection of the right to privacy in the digital age. Importantly, it encourages states gathering at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva to identify and clarify principles, standards and best practices, including through the establishment of a UN expert mechanism on the right to privacy.

Amnesty International calls on UN member states to again support adoption of the resolution by consensus at the General Assembly Plenary in December and on the UN Human Rights Council, its members and observers to work diligently to give greater practical effect to the right to privacy in the digital age at the Council's twenty-eighth session in March 2015.

The establishment of an expert mechanism will be an important step in the promotion and protection of the right to privacy. It will close a long-standing gap and is supported by prominent UN human rights experts, including the UN Special Rapporteurs on the promotion and protection of human right and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism and on freedom of opinion and expression.

The UN General Assembly resolution on "the right to privacy in the digital age" is an important stepping stone in the promotion and protection of the right to privacy and much more needs to be done. Mass surveillance of people's communications will not end with declarations of good intentions, states must urgently live up to their obligation to uphold privacy and act on the various recommendations adopted unanimously today.