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Turkmenistan clamps down on mobile and internet users

Amnesty International is calling on the Turkmenistani authorities to immediately lift the suspension of the operation of the country's largest mobile phone service provider until arrangements can be made to provide an alternative service enabling them to access independent news sites.

Earlier this week, the authorities suspended the operation of the privately-owned and Moscow-based service provider, Mobile TeleSystems (MTS), leaving around 2.5 million people, half of the country's population and 80 per cent of the mobile phone-users, suddenly unable to use their mobile phones or access the internet.

"With their arbitrary actions the Turkmenistan authorities are severely restricting communications within the country and with the outside world," said John Dalhuisen, Europe and Central Asia Deputy Programme Director.

"This measure will unlawfully interfere with correspondence and violate the right of many people in Turkmenistan to receive and impart information in breach of international human rights standards."

Thousands of people in remote parts of Turkmenistan do not have land lines or access to the internet at home. Many of these people rely instead on mobile phones.

People may now be isolated and unable to call for help in an emergency. For the last few days Amnesty International has been trying unsuccessfully to get in touch with contacts in Turkmenistan.

Meanwhile, MTS users are left with no choice but to buy the services of Altyn Asyr, the state-owned service provider, which blocks access to independent news sites and the websites of opposition groups.

President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov came to power in Turkmenistan in 2007, promising to uphold human rights. Three years on, repression of any form of peaceful dissent continues unabated.

In September this year he called on the Ministry of National Security to fight those who "defame our democratic law-based secular state and try to destroy the unity and solidarity of our society."

"There is a serious risk that the authorities could use state-owned service providers to monitor conversations and exclude individuals from communicating by mobile phone," John Dalhuisen said.

"In a country, where the right to freedom of expression has been under constant attack, the suspension of a service that allowed some contact with the outside world seems ominous."