

Egypt's internet shutdown draws fire in US

WASHINGTON: The Egyptian government's unprecedented shutdown of internet access came under fire on Friday (28 January 2011) from the White House, social networking giants and digital rights groups.

US President Barack Obama's press secretary Robert Gibbs took to Twitter to urge the embattled Egyptian authorities to restore internet service in the country of some 80 million people.

"Government must respect the rights of the Egyptian people and turn on social networking and internet," Gibbs said on his Twitter feed [@PressSec](#).

Speaking later to reporters at the White House, Gibbs said, "We believe the basket of individual freedoms includes the freedom to access the internet and the freedom to use social networking sites.

"We believe that the people of Egypt have a right to freedom of expression and freedom of speech, and that includes the use of the internet."

Facebook, the world's largest social network with nearly 600 million members, and Twitter also weighed in on the digital crackdown by the Egyptian authorities after days of street protests against President Hosni Mubarak.

"The internet provides people around the world with the power to connect, to learn, and to share," Andrew Noyes, a Facebook spokesman, said in a statement.

"A world without the internet is unimaginable," Noyes said.

"Although the turmoil in Egypt is a matter for the Egyptian people and their government to resolve, limiting internet access for millions of people is a matter of concern for the global community," he said.

"It is essential to communication and to commerce," the Facebook spokesman said. "No one should be denied access to the internet."

Twitter, which has more than 175 million registered users, said of efforts to block the service in Egypt: "We believe that the open exchange of info and views benefits societies and helps govts better connect w/ their people."

US digital rights groups were also among those condemning the cutoff of internet access by the Egyptian authorities.

Leslie Harris, president of the Center for Democracy and Technology, called it a "stunning and highly counterproductive

step backwards."

"This action is inconsistent with all international human rights norms, and is unprecedented in internet history," Harris said. "Egypt's actions will only fuel unrest and make peaceful resolution of grievances far more difficult."

The French-based Reporters Without Borders said the Egyptian authorities were seeking to engineer a news blackout.

"By blocking the internet and by attacking and arresting Egyptian and foreign journalists, the Egyptian government is trying both to prevent the protests from being organised and to prevent them from being covered internationally," RSF secretary-general Jean-Francois Julliard said.

According to Renesys, a US internet monitoring company, Egypt's four main internet service providers cut off international access to their customers in a near simultaneous move on Thursday.

Mobile telephone networks were also severely disrupted in Egypt on Friday.

Vodafone said in a statement that all mobile operators in Egypt had been "instructed to suspend services in selected areas."

"Under Egyptian legislation the authorities have the right to issue such an order and we are obliged to comply with it," it said.

Source: AFP

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