

Google threatens to quit China

Written by Taipei Times

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Internet giant Google Inc on Tuesday made a shock threat to quit China, the world's biggest Internet market by number of users, after hackers accessed human rights activists' e-mail accounts.

"These attacks and the surveillance they have uncovered — combined with attempts over the past year to further limit free speech on the Web — have led us to conclude that we should review the feasibility of our business operations in China," Google chief legal officer David Drummond said in a statement.

"We recognize that this may well mean having to shut down Google.cn, and potentially our offices in China," he said.

TENSIONS

The hacking intensified Sino-US frictions as Washington said that Internet control was a serious issue and demanded an explanation from Beijing.

"The ability to operate with confidence in cyberspace is critical in a modern society and economy," US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said yesterday.

"We have been briefed by Google on these allegations, which raise very serious concerns and questions," Clinton said in a statement in Honolulu. "We look to the Chinese government for an explanation."

Beijing has not made any significant comment on Google's allegation.

Chinese authorities were "seeking more information on Google's statement that it could quit China," Xinhua news agency reported, citing an unnamed official at the State Council Information Office.

China has said it does not sponsor hacking. Its officials have also accused the West of seeking to undermine China's one-party rule by backing dissidents and campaigns against censorship.

Google said the hackers in the recent attack had tried to break into Gmail accounts of Chinese human rights activists, but only managed to access two unidentified accounts, and could only see subject headings and other data such as when the account was created.

It did not say what information the hackers tried to access from other companies, nor which they were. Google said it was now notifying the other affected corporations, adding it was working with US authorities.

A Google spokesperson said the company was still investigating the attack and would not say whether Google believed Chinese authorities were involved.

A New York Times report on its Web site quoted James Mulvenon, an expert on Chinese cyberwarfare capabilities, as saying: "A United States expert on cyber warfare said that 34 companies were targeted, most of them high-technology companies in Silicon Valley. The attacks came from Taiwanese Internet addresses."

Microsoft, whose rival Hotmail e-mail service is also available in China, said it had no indication that any of its mail properties had been compromised in China.

CHINESE SUPPORT

Meanwhile, Google's announcement drew applause, warnings and bouquets from dissidents and Internet activists yesterday, with few seeing much chance of the wary government giving ground.

At the company's China headquarters in Beijing's university district, a dozen locals laid a bouquet of red roses and white lilies on Google's sign at the entrance to the company.

They praised the company, shouting some salty Beijing slang.

"We want to express outrage, but not at Google. Coming here is a type of support for Google," IT worker Zhao Gang, 30, said.

"Google faces very strict and adverse conditions in China. Something we knew in our hearts is now out in the open. I believe it's a watershed moment for the Internet in China this year," Zhao said.

Chinese activists have long complained that the Communist Party has tightened its grip on the Internet, stifling the spread of information and ideas in the name of public safety and morals.

"The surprise isn't the hacking or censorship. That's everywhere here," said Liu Ning, a writer and blogger in Beijing. "The surprise is such a big company breaking the silence about all these problems ... Until now, they've kept quiet."

Yet even Chinese dissidents who welcomed Google's stance saw little chance of Beijing bowing to the renewed pressure, worried the country's 360 million Internet users could be exposed to banned news and ideas, especially challenges to one-party rule.

"Our space for expression on the Internet has been narrowing, because government control has become increasingly detailed and pervasive. I don't see that relaxing," said Xu Youyu, a Beijing academic who has campaigned for broader human rights.

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