

Blockage of internet services

Responsibility shifting between IT ministry, PTA

By Mehtab Haider

ISLAMABAD: With the blockage of internet for major businesses such as Microsoft office in Pakistan, USAID, UNICEF and several others in the last two weeks, the responsibility has been shifting between the ministry of IT, PTA, premier intelligence agency and vendors at each other shoulders, official sources said.

The Ministry of Information Technology and PTA are completely clueless about blocking of the internet through virtual private networks (VPNs), which is causing multimillion dollars loss to the country, the officials said.

On the name of blocking grey trafficking, complaints are on the rise as blocking of VPNs (virtual private networks) started, which has now become a major issue negatively impacting the industry.

In the last two weeks, IP ad-

resses of major businesses such as Microsoft office in Pakistan, USAID, UNICEF, I2C, CureMD, Arpatech, Rockville, OMV, Bakerhughes, and many others were blocked without any intimation, the officials said. The indiscriminate IP addresses and VPN blocking is causing millions of dollars revenue loss to the country, they said.

An official communication sent to the Ministry of IT stated that under the recently established system by the government of Pakistan to curb grey traffic, IP addresses blocking on internet backbone has been started.

While the intentions for having such a system may be good, the government has unfortunately done another experiment this time at the risk and cost of the internet users and broadband operators of the country by giving systems in the hands of Inter Services Intelligence

(ISI).

The broadband operators and call centres are prime victim of this mechanism. Legitimate and even whitelisted IP addresses of operators are getting blocked without any reason, it said.

Previously, IP addresses of DNS, Authentication Servers and Core Routers of Qubee, a leading a WiMax operator, got blocked twice on the same day, resulting in jamming of the countrywide network and leaving thousands of customers screaming, it said.

IP addresses of the other operators, including WiTribe, Linkdotnet, etc, are also getting blocked. Many customers use VPNs (virtual private networks) on the internet to connect to their proprietary and secure networks for various business applications, it said.

These VPNs, which are now integral part of any Internet connection, are also getting

blocked left, right and center with no solution in place to allow legitimate users and filter grey traffic.

Leading call centers and software houses of the country, including TRG, Ovex, Shellby and so many others are running from pillar to post to get their IPs whitelisted. PTA officials seem helpless because the system is not in their control. So the red-tape circle of whitelisting on IPs is extended from the customer to the operator, from the operator to PTA, from PTA to ISI and ISI to the vendor, and same return path. It is taking weeks to resolve the issues that should have been addressed in minutes.

The industry has asked the government to look into the matter and get a proper standard operating mechanism in place where IPs are whitelisted and such lists are implemented within 48 hours with no whitelisted IPs subject to block-

ing.

There should be no limit on the number of IPs got whitelisted by a licensed operator. Complaints of operators should be addressed on 24 x 7 basis with resolution time and escalation levels defined.

In case of blocking of whitelisted IPs of the operators, financial compensation should be given to the operators by the Ministry of IT as operators are now being asked by their customers for compensation.

When contacted to Secretary Ministry of IT, Akhalque Ahmed Tarar on Friday, he conceded that they received different complaints in this regard and recently meeting was convened to resolve this issue.

He said that the relevant authorities were directed to implement Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) in true letter and spirit and without taking PTA into confidence none of VPN should be blocked.