

## Grey phone traffic: IT authorities passing the buck to ISI

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ISLAMABAD: The government's information technology authorities deserve spanking as they have not just terribly failed to address some burning issues facing internet users but have also shifted the burden of blocking and monitoring grey traffic to the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).

The terrorism hit Pakistan requires of its intelligence agencies to focus on countering the internal and international security challenges but the authorities here have already tasked the ISI to monitor and block grey traffic without any legal mandate.

Consequently, the ISI controlled private vendors installed system to detect and block illegal telephony is choking the country's internet resulting in disruptions of various internet applications like virtual private networks (VPNs), Skype, voice chatting, video conferencing etc.

Sources said that

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complaints received by the authorities show that the system is also disrupting services of broadband operators, call centres, software companies and other businesses.

It was the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) government that had established a controversial International Clearing House (ICH) last year amid allegations of huge kickbacks under which the country's all incoming telephony traffic was routed through a single telecom operator instead of 13 licensed operators.

Under the same agreement, all international long distance (LDI) operators pooled a sum of \$27 million (Rs2.8 billion) and paid to the ISI for purchase of the modern system for blocking of illegal traffic. Previously, Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) had installed this type of equipment about five years back but the mandate was shifted this time to the intelligence agency for unknown reasons.

Lawful Intercept (LI), commonly known as tapping of all telephone and internet traffic, is already mandated to intelligence agencies but this is first time in history of Pakistan that task of blocking of illegal traffic on internet has been mandated to the intelligence agency.

Grey traffic refers to international incoming calls that use internet instead of licensed routes resulting in loss of foreign exchange to the government. Sources maintain the ICH agreement was painted as instrument

of national security and intelligence agency was involved to keep everything under the carpet and avoid competitive bidding in procurement of the costly system.

The Competition Commission of Pakistan (CCP) has already declared ICH agreement illegal but it is still continuing due to stay orders granted by the courts. After implementation of the ICH and increasing the call rates to Pakistan, legal traffic to Pakistan dropped drastically and a huge surge was reported in grey traffic. The PTA and FIA have been working together to detect illegal exchanges, conduct raids and arrest culprits. The question remains that the country's premier intelligence agency has been given the powers and mandate to arrest telecom fraudsters and tax evaders.

It is said that the PTA in last few days has received floods of complaints from broadband operators on blocking of legitimate internet traffic. But its officials privately concede that they are helpless in the situation as it has no control over the system and officials of the agency hardly listen to them in addressing the complaints in a timely manner.

The sources say that the whole Internet traffic of the country has been left at the mercy of a system that is being operated in an amateur manner in total disregard to the agony faced by the telecom operators, call centres and internet users. Call centres are losing huge foreign exchange revenue and Pakistan is getting bad publicity in international business community.

The internet industry has thus been kept hostage to a system whose origin is illegal and design and operations totally non-professional.

The system on the other hand is already proving to be ineffective for the real culprits as grey traffic is now reportedly being shifted to satellite antennas thus bypassing this all blockage. Pakistan has more than 30 million internet users and the country's total internet traffic is routed through two operators and four under sea optical fibre cables connecting Karachi with rest of the world.

Billions of rupees are annually spent on IT related official establishments but they have also terribly failed to install as yet a modern filtration system to block blasphemous and pornographic material. The easy way out for them is to continue the blockade of YouTube.

The newly appointed chairman PTA, when approached by The News, said that authorities are holding meetings with different stakeholders to resolve the issue of internet disruption. "We are trying to fix the problems," he said, adding that the ISI controlled system is also being transferred to the PTA, which he believes will also help quickly resolve the internet issues.

Regarding the YouTube resumption, he said the PTA is presently holding meetings with the Google administration to enter into an agreement whereby objectionable material, particularly the blasphemous stuff, could be blocked through Google.