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Sent: Wednesday, April 20, 2011 8:58 AM
To: Mills, Cheryl D
Subject: U.S. Funds Help Democracy Activists Evade Internet Crackdowns

U.S. Funds Help Democracy Activists Evade Internet Crackdowns

By Nicole Gaouette and Brendan Greeley

April 20 (Bloomberg) -- The U.S. State Department is set to announce $28 million in grants to help Internet activists, particularly in countries where the governments restrict e-mail and social networks such as those offered by Facebook Inc., Twitter Inc. and Google Inc.

The program, which has drawn Republican criticism and budget cuts, has produced software that is spreading widely in Iran and Syria, helping pro-democracy activists avoid detection, said Dan Baer, deputy assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights and labor.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently described web restrictions by more than 40 governments as a "disturbing trend." Governments can't escape the impact of today's social networks and the U.S. is committed to helping people worldwide connect, she said in an April 12 speech.

"We will stand with those who exercise their fundamental freedoms of expression and assembly in a peaceful way, whether in person, in print, or in pixels on the Internet," she said.

Governments have curtailed Internet freedom in two ways.

First, they've blocked foreign news and social networking sites. Facebook, for example, is frequently unavailable in China and Vietnam. Activists use circumvention software to route around these blocks.

Second, governments track, harass and arrest activists who meet online. Tunisia, before President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's fall from power on Jan. 14, spoofed Facebook and Gmail login pages to steal passwords. Egypt, before President Hosni Mubarak stepped down, arrested opposition bloggers.

Competing Approaches

Republicans in Congress said the U.S. should focus on helping activists get around government firewalls, such as China's. The State Department has taken a broader approach, making training and protecting activists "perhaps the most critical part" of its mission, Michael Posner, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, said in a March 19 interview.

"There's been one paradigm, that's the Chinese firewall," Posner said. "But there's another piece of this, which has I think become more and more evident in the months since the Tunisian demonstrations began," he said. "Governments are also effectively trying to attack people who are activists using the Internet."

The State Department has built up a stable of technically able activists to help democracy movements in places including China and Iran. They have created firewall circumvention software and trained more than 5,000 people to avoid detection while using services such as San Francisco-based Twitter, Baer said.

'Underground Railroad'

Training takes place through "an underground railroad of trust," said Baer. "We're opportunistic about going to places where people are, or taking them to places that are safe."

By summer, Baer said, the department will have awarded grants of more than $50 million.

About $22 million already spent includes all funding from fiscal years 2008 and 2009 and some funding for fiscal year 2010. The $28 million in new grants, which the agency is soon expected to advise Congress about, is from fiscal year 2010.

One result has been creation of "panic button" technology for mobile phones, which activists can use to erase their address books if they are arrested, to avoid incriminating colleagues. Other programs help keep web sites running when governments attack them.

Posner said department officials are approaching funding of these projects "like venture capitalists," doling out small amounts to a wide variety of companies in a competitive process through May, 2011.

Republican Criticism

Republicans including Arizona Senator Jon Kyl and Indiana Senator Richard Lugar, the ranking Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, have criticized the administration for not focusing exclusively on firewall circumvention.

Baer argues the broader approach is needed. "If the objective is to empower people on the ground, you have to keep them out of jail. That means they have to be able to circumvent any blocks, get out their message, communicate with people and have the self-defense training," said Baer.

To only teach people how to circumvent firewalls "would be tantamount to painting a target on activists' backs," said Courtney Austrian, director of the State Department's office of policy planning and public diplomacy.

Lugar also released a report Feb. 15 that faulted Clinton's agency for not spending the $30 million Congress allocated last year more quickly.

Budget Cut

Last week, the Republican-controlled House cut the agency's budget for Internet freedom by one third to $20 million this year, part of the plan to cut the federal deficit in fiscal 2011.

"Twelve months elapsed before the State Department moved to disburse some $30 million in funds specifically appropriated for Internet freedom promotion, including the development of Internet censorship circumvention technology. Such technology should be given a much higher priority by the U.S. government," Lugar wrote.

The cuts mean "we have less money than we had hoped to fund valuable programs," said Posner in an e-mail. "But there is a great and growing interest in promoting Internet freedom and $20 million is no small amount of money these days. We're going to use that money wisely to help embattled democracy and human rights activists. And we hope we'll get more funds for this important work in 2012."

Stable of Geeks

The delay in using the funding came because it took time to build up the stable of "geeks at the intersection of human rights and technology," Baer said. Two and a half years ago, grant advertisements drew two applications. The latest advertisement drew 60, Baer said in a telephone interview.

"Money does matter in this space," says Brett Solomon, executive director of Access Now, a private organization that supports Internet freedom. His organization does not accept money from governments because it can carry a stigma.

The wisdom of accepting government funds depends on where they are employed. "In Syria," said Solomon, "how they frame the opposition as lackeys, a falsely generated movement, can actually put people at risk." In Burma, by contrast, the regime does not rely on an anti-American narrative.

Republicans have pushed for more money for Internet circumvention to go to the Broadcasting Board of Governors, which oversees government media including Voice of America.

Last year the BBG funneled the $1.5 million it received for circumvention technology to the Global Internet Freedom Consortium, a group that provides anti-censorship software and is associated with the Falun Gong, a Buddhist spiritual sect banned in China.

Outside News Blocked

Posner described the work of the BBG and the State Department as "different, but complementary." The BBG has a legitimate interest in tools that allow traffic to reach the Voice of America site and other Western news sources, he said.

A group of Internet activists, lawyers and academics, including senior researchers from MIT and Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet & Society, recently wrote to Congress to urge them not to redirect money to the BBG. The BBG's "overemphasis" on firewall circumvention efforts doesn't meet the needs of on-the-ground activists, the letter said.

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