China writers say Google ready to settle book row

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Google Inc. wants to apologize for its poor communication with Chinese authors about scanning their books into its online library and is ready to work out a settlement to allay copyright concerns, a writer's group said Sunday.

The U.S. search giant has been working the past five years on an ambitious plan to scan all the world's books into a digital library accessible to anyone with an Internet connection. Google says the project is an invaluable chance for books to get more exposure, but many authors and publishers argue it is a copyright violation.

The Chinese Writers' Association said it received a letter from Google acknowledging its efforts had upset Chinese authors.

"Following discussions and communications in recent months, we do believe that our communication with Chinese writers has not been good enough," Google said in the scanned letter posted on the association's Web site.

"Google is ready to apologize to Chinese writers about this," said the letter, which bore the signature of Erik Hartmann, Asia-Pacific head of Google Books.

The authenticity of the letter could not immediately be confirmed. Calls to Google officials in Hong Kong and China rang unanswered Sunday.

Last month, a Chinese court heard Chinese author Mian Mian's lawsuit against Google for scanning her work into its library. A Beijing judge told the two sides to hold talks on a settlement and report back, according to the writer's lawyer.

The search giant's apparent statement comes after a recent call by the government-affiliated China Written Works Copyright Society to negotiate compensation for Chinese authors.

Google plans to work out a settlement proposal with Chinese writers by March and reach a formal agreement by June, the scanned letter said. It said it would take the "unprecedented move" of making a complete list of Chinese books it has scanned, in response to a request from the writers' group.

Google has scanned more than 10 million books worldwide since 2004, including 2 million with the consent of about 30,000 publishers. Another 2 million books in Google's library no longer are in copyright. Google has been only showing snippets from the remaining books while it tries to iron out copyright disputes.

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