

Report finds online censorship more sophisticated

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Repressive regimes have stepped up efforts to censor the Internet and jail dissidents, Reporters Without Borders said in a study out Thursday.

China, Iran and Tunisia, which are on the group's "Enemies of the Internet" list, got more sophisticated at censorship and overcoming dissidents' attempts to communicate online, said Reporters Without Borders' Washington director, Clothilde Le Coz.

Meanwhile, Turkey and Russia found themselves on the group's "Under Surveillance" list of nations in danger of making the main enemies list.

Although Zimbabwe and Yemen dropped from the surveillance list, that was primarily because the Internet isn't used much in either country, rather than because of changes by the governments, Le Coz said.

Reporters Without Borders issued the third annual report ahead of Friday's World Day Against Cyber Censorship, an awareness campaign organized by the Paris-based media advocacy group.

Le Coz said repressive regimes seemed to be winning a technological tussle with dissidents who try to circumvent online restrictions. She said some U.S. technology companies have been aiding the regimes by selling products that could be used for such censorship, or by cooperating with authorities and requests for censorship.

Companies she cited include Cisco Systems Inc., which has been criticized by activists who say that it sells networking equipment that could be used in official efforts to monitor and control Internet use. In a statement Thursday, the company reiterated that it does not provide any government with any special capabilities, and said products sold in China are the same ones sold elsewhere.

Reporters Without Borders said it was optimistic about Google Inc.'s public threats to leave China if the Silicon Valley powerhouse cannot reach a deal that lets the company offer search results there free of censorship.

"A year from now, I would be happy to tell you that Google opened the path," Le Coz said. "That's a bit idealistic."

In fact, she worries that more democratic nations would be joining the list.

Australia is among the countries under the group's surveillance for its efforts to require Internet service providers to block sites that the government deems

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inappropriate, including child pornography and instructions in crime or drug use. Critics are worried that the list of sites to be blocked and the reasons for doing so would be kept secret, opening the possibility that legitimate sites might be censored.

In Russia, newly added to the watch list, politically active bloggers have been increasingly arrested, Reporters Without Borders said. In Turkey, several sites, including the video-sharing service YouTube, have been blocked.

China and Tunisia, meanwhile, have employed increasingly sophisticated filtering, while Iran stepped up its Internet crackdown and surveillance amid a disputed presidential election last summer. Countries such as China have defended their Internet practices and accused critics in the U.S. in particular of "information imperialism."

Joining those three countries on the main enemies list are Cuba, Egypt, Myanmar, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Vietnam.

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