Google's China answer page inaccessible

The Associated Press

A Google question-and-answer page for Chinese users was inaccessible from mainland China on Tuesday less than a month after the search giant's Internet license was renewed amid a dispute over online censorship.

The company found no technical problems with the Hong Kong-based service, said a Google Inc. spokewoman, Courtney Hohne, in an e-mail. Phone calls to China's Internet regulator, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, were not answered and the agency did not respond to questions sent by fax.

Beijing encourages Web use for education and business but tries to block material deemed subversive and closely watches sites where China's public can leave comments. Regulators block access to social networking sites abroad such as Facebook that pro-democracy and Tibet activists have used to criticize the communist government.

Google's future in China has been uncertain since the company announced in January it no longer wanted to cooperate with Beijing's Web censorship and shut down its China-based search engine in March. Mainland Web surfers can reach Google's Chinese-language site in Hong Kong, which has no online censorship, but industry analysts say users might defect to local rivals, eroding its advertising revenues.

Beijing renewed Google's Internet license last month despite the censorship dispute, which embarrassed communist officials and prompted questions about whether they might punish the U.S. company by barring it from China. The country is the world's most populous Internet market, with 420 million people online.

The answer page, www.google.com.hk/wenda, allows Chinese Web surfers to leave questions for other users to answer. Most of those posted since the service was launched two weeks ago are about consumer products and housing prices.

Google launched the site after announcing last month it would end a similar service run in partnership with a Chinese website, tianya.com.

The search page of Google's Hong Kong site was accessible from the mainland on Tuesday.

The uncertainty over Google in China has helped rival Baidu Inc., operator of the country's most popular search engine.

Google's share of search revenues fell from 31 percent in the first three months of the year to 24 percent in the second quarter, according to Analysys International, a research firm in Beijing. It said Baidu's share rose to 70 percent in the second

quarter for the first time, up from 64 percent in the previous quarter.

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Google question-and-answer page (in Chinese): www.google.com.hk/wenda

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