SKorean police say Google violated laws

The Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) -- Police said Thursday that Google Inc. violated South Korean laws and referred the case to state prosecutors, adding to a slew of privacy cases the world's largest search engine is facing.

Google has been accused of collecting e-mails and other personal information from unsecured wireless networks while it took photos of neighborhoods in South Korea for its "Street View" mapping service between October 2009 and May 2010.

In May, the search engine announced it had inadvertently collected fragments of people's online activities from unsecured Wi-Fi networks in more than 30 countries, prompting investigations around the globe.

Street View provides street-level images on Google Earth and Google Maps. Google said entire e-mails, Internet addresses known as URLs and passwords were among items its researchers collected.

South Korean police concluded after months of analysis of hard disks obtained from Google that the company's activities broke South Korean laws protecting privacy of telecommunications and protecting information about locations, said Jung Suk-hwa, a police officer in charge of the investigation.

He said prosecutors will decide whether to charge Google with violating the two South Korean laws, which stipulate fines up to 50 million won ($44,800) and 30 million won ($26,900) respectively. He did not give any specific timeframe.

Google again apologized for intruding, but it expressed disappointment over the police announcement.

"While we have repeatedly acknowledged that the collection of payload data was a mistake, we are disappointed with this announcement as we believe Google Inc. and its employee did nothing illegal in Korea," Google Korea spokesman Ross LaJeunesses said in a statement.

He also said Google's ultimate objective remains to delete the data as soon as possible.

In addition to international investigations, about 40 U.S. states are seeking to review information to see if Google improperly accessed e-mails, passwords and other private data.

Google's disclosure has generated a variety of responses. Greek officials asked for more safeguards before its streets were photographed, and some English villagers protested by forming a human chain to stop a camera van.

In November, Google bowed to pressure from German residents and made that country the only one in the world where people can ask in advance to have images of their homes excluded from the Street View feature.

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