

UK facing "disturbing" number of cyber attacks

British government and industry computer systems are facing a "disturbing" number of cyber attacks, including a recent serious assault on the Foreign Office's network, the head of Britain's communications spy agency said on Monday.

Iain Lobban, director of the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), said the attacks posed a threat to Britain's economic wellbeing.

"The volume of e-crime and attacks on government and industry systems continue to be disturbing," Lobban wrote in an article for the Times newspaper.

"I can attest to attempts to steal British ideas and designs -- in the IT, technology, defense, engineering and energy sectors as well as other industries -- to gain commercial advantage or to profit from secret knowledge of contractual arrangements."

Lobban's GCHQ agency, a big eavesdropping operation similar to the National Security Agency in the United States, handles operations such as intelligence-gathering and code-busting and is at the forefront of Britain's cyber defenses.

Lobban rarely makes public comments, and his article comes a year after he gave a speech, saying countries were using cyber warfare techniques to attack each other.

He repeated his message that concerted attacks were being waged on the government as well as companies.

"We are also aware of similar techniques being employed to try to acquire sensitive information from British government computer systems, including one significant (but unsuccessful) attempt on the Foreign Office and other government departments this summer," he wrote.

Politicians and spy chiefs around the world have increasingly been warning about growing cyber threats from other countries and from organized criminals.

The last year has seen a dramatic increase in reported cyber attacks often linked to governments, from apparent attempts at data theft at the International Monetary Fund and elsewhere often blamed on China, to the Stuxnet computer worm attack on Iran's nuclear program linked to Israel and the United States.

Britain is hosting a major international conference on the management of cyberspace this week which will be attended by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and senior representatives from China, Russia, India and other governments and leading industry figures.

It will look at how there can be greater international cooperation on tackling cyber

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issues, but is unlikely to produce any immediate consensus on what should or could be done.

British Foreign Secretary William Hague told the Times there were more than 600 "malicious" attacks on British government systems every day, while criminals could obtain stolen credit card details of Britons over the Internet for just 70 pence.

He said countries which could not protect their banking systems and intellectual property would be at a serious disadvantage in future.

"It will be harder for businesses to grow and survive and for individuals to maintain their confidential information," Hague said. "That is why it is urgent to prevent this."

Britain is putting 650 million pounds (\$1 billion) into preventing attacks over the next four years, and both Hague and Lobban said governments and businesses needed to work together to address the threats.

"Cyberspace is going to be one of the great challenges of our day," Lobban said.

(\$1 = 0.619 British Pounds)

(Reporting by Michael Holden; editing by Elizabeth Piper)

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