

Australian lawmaker confirms China hacked spy base

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CANBERRA, Australia (AP) — Chinese hackers stole the blueprints of Australia's new spy agency headquarters years ago and the breach has been dealt with since then, an opposition lawmaker said Wednesday in the first confirmation of media reports.

"These events did take place some time ago," senior opposition lawmaker George Brandis told Sky News television after a confidential briefing with Australian Security Intelligence Organization officials.

"I can say this is a very serious matter; ASIO has dealt with it; beyond that I'm not sure that there's a lot I can say," he added.

The 630 million Australian dollar (\$608 million) building housing the headquarters of Australia's main spy agency is near completion in the national capital.

Australian Broadcasting Corp. television had reported on Monday night that a cyberattack on a building contractor exposed plans such as communications

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cabling, server locations and security systems and was traced to a Chinese server.

The government has refused to discuss specifics on the matter. When Prime Minister Julia Gillard told Parliament the ABC report was "inaccurate" on Tuesday, she refused to go into any detail.

Brandis later demanded and got a confidential briefing with ASIO Director-General David Irvine. And while he wouldn't discuss what was said, he disputed Gillard's statement.

"She said the allegations are false; that claim is wrong," Brandis said.

The government responded by criticizing Brandis for discussing in the media a confidential security briefing.

The ABC reported that China could use the blueprints to bug the building.

Des Ball, an Australian National University cybersecurity expert, told the ABC that given the breach, ASIO would either have to operate with "utmost sensitivity" within its own building or simply "rip the whole insides out and ... start again."

But The Australian newspaper reported on Wednesday that the plans were stolen at least three years ago and the agency's operations were no longer at risk.

In an unsourced report, the newspaper said the breach occurred in 2009 or 2010. Although construction began in 2008, the discovery of the breach meant that ASIO had the opportunity to alter the designs of the building to reduce the risk of espionage.

The lakeside glass and concrete structure was to be completed in 2012, but has faced construction delays and cost blowouts since it was initially budgeted to cost AU\$460 million.

Attorney General Mark Dreyfus, the minister in charge of the spy agency, said ASIO will move in this year.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei said China opposed hacking in any form and questioned what evidence the ABC report relied on.

"Since it is technically untraceable, it is very difficult to find the source and identify the hacker," Hong said. "Therefore we have no idea what is the evidence for their report in which they make the claim with such certainty."

He said countries needed to cooperate to fight hacking. "Groundless accusations won't solve the problem," Hong said.

ASIO has grown rapidly since the al-Qaida attacks on the United States on Sept. 11, 2001, and needs the new headquarters to house its growing staff that has trebled to almost 1,800 in a decade.

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