

## Australian Internet censorship raises concerns for U.S.

By JOHN MAYNARD  
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SYDNEY—The U.S. government has spoken out strongly against the Australian government's move to censor the Internet, but Australian Communications Minister Stephen Conroy is not backing down.

U.S. State Department spokesman Michael Tran raised concerns about Australia's filter plans earlier this week.

"Our main message of course is that we remain committed to advancing the free flow of information, which we view as vital to economic prosperity, and preserving open societies globally," Tran told The Associated Press.

"We don't discuss the details of specific diplomatic exchanges, but I can say that in the context of that ongoing relationship, we have raised our concerns on this matter with Australian officials," he added.

The Australian federal government intends to introduce legislation within weeks requiring all Internet service providers to block access to illegal material, such as child pornography, or content that has been refused classification by the Australian Communications and Media Authority.

Conroy said on Australian national radio that it would be inappropriate to talk about discussions with the U.S. government, but said the Australian government remains committed to the plan.

Criticism of the filter has centered

around the Australian government's refusal to release a list of banned Web sites, raising concerns that governments could censor at will, without proper oversight.

While Conroy conceded that there might have to be more oversight, he says the Australian government is only providing the same level of censorship it applies to films and books.

Releasing the "blacklist" would defeat the purpose of the filter, he said.

"When you publish a list of titles of books that are banned or movies that are banned, you don't give access to the materials by producing that list," he told ABC radio. "The problem when you produce a list of URLs is you are actually giving the address of where to go and look."

Google Australia raised concerns about the filter on its official blog in December last year, saying "At Google, we are concerned by the government's plans to introduce a mandatory filtering regime for Internet service providers in Australia, the first of its kind amongst Western democracies."

While Google conceded that there may be a need for certain restrictions, it said, "We have a bias in favour of people's right to free expression."

The Internet giant also noted that mandatory filtering would "negatively impact user access speeds," while questioning the effectiveness of restricting material on high-volume sites, such as Wikipedia, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter.

## Kidnapping proves lucrative for Pakistani militants

PAKISTANI CONTINUED FROM P1

According to official figures, in the first two months of this year alone, 240 people were kidnapped across the country. However, only 74 have so far been returned.

The problem has been linked to the country's floundering economy. Pakistan was recently the recipient of a \$7.6 billion bailout from the International Monetary Fund.

However the country may already be in a vicious cycle. The growth in kidnappings in recent years has made doing business in Pakistan less attractive to foreign investors.

Last week, a letter from the Punjab Home Department to local police, stated that terrorists were planning on kidnapping Western targets within the coming days.

The letter, seen by local media, was said to have come from the intelligence information garnered from captured militants working for the banned Lashkar-e-Islam organization.

However, it is not just foreigners who are at risk. Satish Anand, a renowned filmmaker from Karachi, was kidnapped last year, and held in the Waziristan tribal region for six months. His family was forced to pay around \$750,000 for his release.

The growing number of kidnappings has meant that the crime is increasingly being seen as profitable to militant groups.

So much so that in March 2008, Taliban forces operating in tribal areas of Northwest Pakistan have "legalized" abductions among their members.

According to the newly adopted "Article 18" of the Taliban's shadow constitution, a "holy warrior who detains a foreign soldier, journalist, or aid worker has the right to ask for money or exchange them for Taliban prisoners."

The link between kidnapers and militants has made the issue difficult to tackle.

"There's a nexus between these miscreants, these militants, and the criminals," Malik Naveed Khan, top police official for the North West



CAUGHT: Pakistani police escort the alleged kidnapers of a 5-year-old British boy in Jhelum, Pakistan on March 25. Thousands of people go missing in Pakistan every year as a result of kidnapping, many of whom do not make it back alive. STR/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Frontier Province, was quoted as saying by AP. "The police do not have enough resources to fight militancy and crime at the same time."

In addition to the relative weakness of police in dealing with the problem, widespread corruption in Pakistan has led many to suspect security forces of being in league with kidnapping gangs.

"Abductions and enforced disappearances, arbitrary detentions, torture, and other ill-treatment plagued the region and, in many cases, were carried out with impunity," a recent report by Amnesty International said.

Many Pakistanis have taken to arming themselves as a means of protection against kidnapping in

the future. However, for expatriate Pakistanis living in Britain, many are simply deciding to stay away.

Shortly after her son was returned to her on March 18, Akila Naqqash, Sahil Saeed's mother, said that she wouldn't put her family in the same situation again.

"I am never going back to Pakistan again in my life," she told reporters.



CONTROVERSIAL COVER: A woman wearing a niqab veil participates in a protest on Feb. 6, 2010 in France, after a panel of French lawmakers recommended a ban on the face-covering veil in all schools, hospitals, public transportation, and government offices. ALAIN JOCARD/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

## Belgian lawmakers set to ban burqa, niqab

By AURELIEN GIRARD  
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PARIS—A law to prohibit the wearing of the burqa and niqab, Muslim face-covering garments, in public places was voted on by Belgian MPs of the Interior Affairs Committee of the Belgian Parliament on Wednesday.

The vote was unanimous, with not a single voice against the proposal. This could soon make Belgium the first European country to ban the controversial clothing considered to be a sign of women's alienation and a threat to public security.

The proposed law states that any person found in any public area "with a covered or dissimulated face, partially or completely, in a way that does not allow proper identification" will face a 15 to 25 euro fine (CA\$20-27) plus a potential seven days in jail, reports Belgian newspaper Le Soir. Motorcyclists and firemen may receive an exemption.

Belgian MPs argued that the law was needed for two key reasons: public security and the defense of women's dignity. Liberal MP Daniel Bacquelaine explained to Le Figaro newspaper that "as in the case of dwarf tossing, even if used on a voluntary basis, the burqa is insulting women's dignity—it is a walking prison."

Christian Democrats said cities and district authorities would be entitled to issue fines in cases where Belgian courts would decide not to fine offenders.

Belgium's Green Party, Ecolo, was the only party to disagree on the form but still voted for the proposal. Ecolo asked for more internal consultation with the Belgium State Council to ensure that the law would not violate the Belgian Constitution or be attacked by the European Court of Human Rights.

Vincent de Coorebyter, a Belgian political scientist, expressed doubts to Le Figaro that the law was really needed. He said city-level regulations already prohibit face-covering garments in several cities.

"Some have therefore questioned the need to draft a law, and even more since the phenomenon relates to but a few hundred women," he said.

A plenary session of the Belgian Parliament is expected to validate the law's text before the end of April. From there, Belgian lawmakers will have the difficult task of ensuring that Muslim women do not present themselves in shops or in the streets wearing a burqa.

Le Soir points out that an unbiased application of the law will mean that spouses of Arab Emirates princes staying in Brussels' luxury hotels will also have to comply.

A comparable law could be voted for in France, although it has not received consensus among political parties. French State Council announced on March 30 that such a law could very likely betray the spirit of the French constitution and be supported by a only weak legal root.

## China fuels elephant poaching in East Africa

ELEPHANT CONTINUED FROM P1

Filed secretly, sellers told the journalist from Unreported World that during a presidential visit from Chinese Communist Party leader Hu Jintao in 2009, two hundred kilos of ivory was bought by Chinese diplomats and taken out of Tanzania.

The sellers did not say if Hu knew of the trade, but did say that a prominent diplomat from the Chinese Embassy frequently bought large amounts of ivory from them.

Kooky Gorman, who owns a wildlife park in Kenya, took the reporter—accompanied by armed rangers—to many spots in her park where elephant carcasses rotted, their heads split open to make it easy to saw the tusks off.

Many hides showed multiple bullet holes. The lead ranger said the killers had used AK47 automatic weapons to spray herds. The shootings were indiscriminate, killing young and old.

Gorman said the weapons were bought from neighbouring Somalia where civil war has continued

since 1991.

The intensity of the poaching has been increasing for the past two years. In 2007, six elephants were poached from her park. In 2008, twenty-eight were poached. Fifty-seven were poached in 2009.

She says there is a threat that the elephants will become extinct.

The Kenya Wildlife Service has strong-rooms full of tusks and carved ivory taken during raids and confiscated at Nairobi airport. The 65 to 70 tons of tusks are estimated to be worth \$10 million.

The U.N. recently rejected Zambia and Tanzania's request to hold a one-off sale for their ivory stockpile, valued of approximately \$15 million.

Since trade in ivory was stopped in 1989, some countries have been allowed to do a small amount of business in ivory if they have good conservation measures. Zambia and Tanzania are currently prohibited from any trade in ivory.

The International Trade of Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora (CITES) annual meeting in Doha recently disregarded

arguments that the sale could help police wildlife parks and bring an end the burden of protecting the horde of ivory.

On the TV program, a police informant who lived in a village known for its illegal ivory deals, said armed groups of 30 men often came from Dara Salam in Senegal to take back ivory in 440-to-660-pound batches. An average tusk weighs about 2 kilos.

The informant, whose face was not shown for fear of reprisal, had recently had his house burned down.

Another man, who did not want to be identified as he had received death threats, was a safari operator who brings tourists to the Selous Game Reserve in Tanzania, which has 40,000 elephants.

"I think the wildlife department knows exactly what's going on here," he said. "There are some members of the games department who are poaching to supplement their pay and feed their families."

He said he thinks dealers are coming from China and the Far East to take bones and that

they are in collusion with local authorities.

He said they could not get through the 15 to 20 policed roadblocks without help from "some very well-placed people."

One illegal dealer said he had friends in airport security. "It's no problem with money," he told the reporter. "If you have money, it's easy."

There is a small industry carving the poached ivory for the East Asian trade. "Many people from China come and buy," he said. There is a market for trinkets, seals, and chopsticks.

Chinese regime officials told Unreported World that they are against the illegal ivory trade and that Chinese diplomats did not illegally purchase or export ivory by misusing diplomatic immunity in 2009.

Most villagers have stood by while violence around the poaching continues. They felt threatened and were unable to prevent the elephant deaths. Now, many see tourism as the main way they can earn a living.

## Obama opens up offshore drilling in energy security plan

OBAMA CONTINUED FROM P1

The holdup in production is the burdensome leasing process, he told The Epoch Times. He said there is a need to lease the resources and streamline the process, adding that some areas off shore were already open for drilling and some other areas will still be closed for drilling—parts of Alaska and the Pacific Coast.

House Republican Leader John Boehner said allowing for offshore oil production off the coast of Virginia is a positive step. But "keeping the Pacific Coast and Alaska, as well as the most promising resources of the

Gulf of Mexico, under lock and key makes no sense," he said in a press release.

"I am open to proposals from my Democratic friends and my Republican friends," Obama said, regarding plans to work toward energy independence.

The Hill reported that the Senate will consider climate change legislation in April. Senators John Kerry, Joe Lieberman, and Lindsey Graham are expected to present legislation on the topic.

Obama said the U.S. has discussed the country's dependence on foreign oil for decades, but Washington lacked the will to

make changes. He said the military is now leading the way. During the announcement at the air base the president was standing in front of an F-18 Navy fighter jet dubbed the "Green Hornet."

The jet is being tested on a mixture of conventional and bio fuels. Obama said that just this year the Department of Defense invested \$2.5 billion to improve energy efficiency and that the Air Force is also testing its jet engines on bio fuels and had some recent successes. The Navy has set a goal to use 50 percent alternative fuel in all planes and ships within ten years.

Obama also mentioned cutting automobile consumption as an important step to reduce dependence on foreign oil. He said the government will take the lead by purchasing hybrid cars, and new plug-in electric cars due out before the end of the year.

Another step is the corporate average fuel economy (CAFE) standards for cars agreed upon last year. The Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Transportation will sign a final rule Thursday on fuel economy for vehicles of model years 2012-2016.