

# Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/india-internet-censorship-in-response-to-29-08-2012,43292.html>

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Asia - India

Internet filtering

## Internet censorship in response to communal violence and rumours

29 August 2012

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Reporters Without Borders is very disturbed by the Indian government's disproportionate and inappropriate censorship of the Internet in response to the inter-ethnic violence of the past two weeks in the northeast of the country.

Rumours of reprisals between communities in the state of Assam, circulating on the Internet and mobile phones fuelled an exodus of more than 200,000 people from the region and at least 80 deaths in acts of violence.

"While taking action to protect the population is legitimate and curbing hate speech is necessary – especially as hate speech itself limits freedom of expression – we urge the authorities not to impose excessive restraints on freedom of information," Reporters Without Borders said. "Instead of resorting to administrative filtering, the content that incites hatred and violence should be better targeted, and no decision should be taken without reference to the courts.

"Preference should be given to removing offensive content rather than blocking access. The authorities must also be more transparent about the methods they use and their legal basis, to restore trust at a time of widespread disinformation. Censorship cannot be the only appropriate response to baseless rumours, which continue to circulate despite the website blocking."

In response to the emergency, the Department of Communication and Information Technology issued [four directives](#) to Internet Service Providers from 18 to 21 August [ordering them](#) to block access to more 300 online locations including Facebook pages, blogs, websites and Twitter accounts. The ISPs were asked to "not mention the name of URLs in the compliance letter."

The [blocked posts, blogs and websites](#) included content inciting violence or spreading rumors. But the government's censorship also trapped other kinds of content, including media reports on violence between Muslims and Buddhists in Burma, pages on the websites of *Al-Jazeera* and the Australian broadcaster *ABC*, and *Agence France-Presse* photos (see the list posted by the Centre for Internet and Society).

One of India's ISPs, Tata Photon, went even further, blocking access to the entire *WordPress.com* blog platform in response to the government's request for certain URLs with offensive content to be blocked. [Bloggers](#) unable to access their accounts tried in vain to obtain redress from Tata Photon.

[Anja Kovacs](#), a specialist in Internet freedoms in India, said one reason why ISPs do as they are told is because they fear losing their licences.

"The fact that their licence agreements contain provisions with regard to the blocking of content is not without significance," Kovacs said. "The inclusion of vague blocking and filtering requirements as an integral part of their licence has increased the pressure on ISPs, as well as heightened their vulnerability."

The government also appealed directly to social networks and blog platforms such as Twitter,

Facebook, YouTube and WordPress to remove "inflammatory and harmful" content.

Several Indian experts have questioned the legality of the government's methods. Pranesh Prakash of the [Centre for Internet and Society](#) said blocked content notification and appeal procedures were not followed. Instead of ordering ISPs to blocked web pages or entire sites, the authorities should have asked them to remove the calls for violence, which are already banned by the conditions of use on the main sites, he said.

A representative of *TwoCircles.net*, a website that was blocked in India although it had not relayed rumours or calls for violence, [said](#): "No one from the government has reached out to us or asking us to take down the 'objectionable content' and we will gladly entertain any request from government, organizations or even individuals if there are grounds for legitimate concerns."

Sushil Kumar Shinde, India's home minister (interior minister), insisted that the government was only "taking strict action against those accounts or people which are causing damage or spreading rumours."

A coalition of bloggers called the **Indian Bloggers' Forum** announced plans to submit a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) petition to the supreme court for all their blogs and websites to be reinstated.

In a separate recent development, phone service operators suspended services in the northern Kashmir Valley on 15 August, the anniversary of India's independence, at the behest of the Jammu and Kashmir state government.

[India](#) was added to the list of "countries under surveillance" in the latest Reporters Without Borders report on "Enemies of the Internet." Citing national security and the need to protect the public, the government has stepped up Internet surveillance and pressure on ISPs since the 2008 Mumbai bombings.

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