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PRESS RELEASE

Iran: Government Launches Web Crime Unit

The government of Iran has bolstered its censorship regime with the launch of a new Web Crime Unit tasked with policing the internet for “insults and lies”. The launch comes just months after the disputed election and the so called ‘Green Revolution’ which saw demonstrators utilise the web as an important tool for organising.

The 12 member Web Crime Unit will search the web ostensibly for cyber crimes and report them directly to the Chief Prosecutor. Although vowing to fight cyber crime in general, the Unit’s political nature is indicated by its emphasis on “insults and lies” – a term often used by the judiciary to describe opposition statements.

Iran’s post-election demonstrations in 2009 showed that the web is one of the last remaining bastions of free expression. Before, during and after the elections, opposition leaders Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, as well as other reformists demonstrated the web’s potential to communicate views, inspire debate and organise support. The new Unit is the latest attempt to suppress the reform movement’s last real means of keeping its campaign alive. It also shows the Iranian authorities’ attempts to isolate the Iranian media and academic community from its global counterparts, and curtail cross-cultural dialogues and debates, with the view of maintaining tight control over information, ideas, and opinions.

“This new Web Crime Unit is clearly censorship and intimidation under the pretence of fighting crime,” says Dr Agnès Callamard, ARTICLE 19 Executive Director. “If the Iranian government arrests bloggers, activists and journalists, they are not only attacking individuals, but also undermining the rights of their fellow Iranians and others to hear the experiences and opinions of others.”

The Islamic Republic of Iran has ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and is therefore obliged as a matter of international law to respect the right to freedom of expression as guaranteed by Article 19.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

- For more information please contact: For more information: please contact Amir Bayani: Amir@article19.org; Tel: +44 2073242514.
- Read ARTICLE 19’s Submission on Iran to the UN Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review at: <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/submissions/iran-article-19-submission-to-the-un-universal-periodic-review.pdf>
- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name

from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.