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PRESS RELEASE

Pakistan: Freedom of Expression on Internet Must be Respected

Decisions by a Pakistani High Court to ban numerous international websites and services violate international human rights law.

The Lahore High Court on 19 May ordered the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority to block the social network website Facebook and hundreds of other pages in response to a Facebook user calling for an “Everybody Draw Mohammed Day”. The court later ordered the blocking of YouTube for the same reason. The ban has resulted in numerous other websites also being affected, including Flickr, Wikipedia, Google, Twitter, some parts of the BBC, and accessing the internet through the Blackberry mobile service. The *Express Tribune* has reported that the total number of blocked websites has reached 1,000.

Participants of a media forum held yesterday in Karachi to discuss the ban were attacked by protesters accusing the organisers of blasphemy.

Previously, Pakistan has banned access to YouTube, Blogspot and Flickr, along with sites relating to corruption by political officials, human rights abuses by the army, nationalist political parties and religious minorities. An attempt to block YouTube in 2008 resulted in most of Pakistan being cut off from the internet after Pakistan Telecom rerouted all YouTube visitors worldwide to a false site, leading to a massive overload of traffic and YouTube being blocked worldwide for a short time. A cybercrime law adopted in 2008 authorises the death penalty for some offenses.

These expansive blocks of internet content violate Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which states that all individuals have a fundamental human right to “to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers ... through any other media of his choice.” Pakistan signed the ICCPR in 2008.

Any curbs on the right to free expression must be strictly limited. The curb must be provided by a law which is clear and understandable, the interference must pursue a legitimate aim as set out under Article 19(3) of the ICCPR, and the restrictions must be necessary and proportionate. The blocking of millions of pages is clearly disproportionate.

“Leaders of countries around the world must understand that speech and information in new media such as the internet are equally protected under the fundamental right to freedom of expression,” says Dr Agnes Callamard, ARTICLE 19 Executive Director . “It is not lawful to ban millions of pages to prevent access to a few.”

ARTICLE 19 calls on the government to remove all blocks that are not justifiable under international human rights law and to reform legislation that allows for blocks to be imposed without due consideration of the freedom of expression.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

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- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works globally 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. For more information on ARTICLE 19 please visit www.article19.org