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Cyberattacks Hit Vietnamese Dissident Blogs

Security engineers at Google Inc. and computer security company McAfee Inc. said malicious software was used to spy on government critics in Vietnam in what analysts suspect is an effort by Hanoi to quash online dissent.

A posting on Google's online security blog Tuesday said "potentially tens of thousands" of people who downloaded software enabling them to type in Vietnamese were affected. Google said the software was used by unknown persons to attack blogs criticizing government policies.

"Specifically, these attacks have tried to squelch opposition to bauxite mining efforts in Vietnam, an important and emotionally charged issue in the country," wrote Neel Mehta, a Google engineer.

"Infected machines have been used both to spy on their owners" as well as render inaccessible blogs and Web sites containing antigovernment content, he wrote.

McAfee went further, saying on its security blog that the software is a politically motivated cyberattack. They reached that conclusion after tracing the attackers to computer addresses in Vietnam and noting targets were Web sites critical of the government, says Dmitri Alperovitch, vice president of threat research at McAfee.

McAfee Chief Technology Officer George Kurtz wrote on the blog Tuesday that the perpetrators

"may have some allegiance to the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam."

Vietnamese government officials didn't respond to requests to comment, and it was unclear who was behind the attacks. A Google spokesman declined to comment beyond the blog post.

The attacks mirror a recent series of similar incidents in China, leading some analysts to suggest that Vietnam—which has cracked down on dissidents in recent months—was copying China's tactics in neutralizing the Internet as a tool for antigovernment activists.

"Vietnam is very keen to learn what China is doing to suppress dissent, and there is a close link between the public security ministries in both countries," said Carlyle Thayer, a Vietnam expert and professor at the University of New South Wales in Canberra.

Internet use in Vietnam has mushroomed in recent years. While initially welcoming this rush of online activity, Vietnam's authorities have shown their concern about how it can be used to spread criticism of government policies and agitate for democracy and other reforms.

"The regime has discovered there is a whole flank they can be outmaneuvered on so they have come in hard. Their policy is to seize the initiative in the cyber domain and crush all opposition," Mr.

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Thayer said.

Last year, government officials instructed Internet service providers to block access to the social-network site Facebook, according to people familiar with the situation.

Other sites that officials consider a threat to national security are also blocked. Separately, the government has jailed around a dozen human-rights activists recently, analysts and diplomats say.

Police last year detained several bloggers for criticizing the government's plans to develop a bauxite mine in the country's Central Highlands in conjunction with Chalco, a unit of China's state-run Aluminum Corp. of China. Critics are concerned about environmental damage resulting from surface mining for bauxite, an ore used in making aluminum. They are also worried about growing Chinese influence in Vietnam.

In December, an activist Web site, bauxitevietnaminfo.com, was hacked. McAfee said attacks began around the same time, including one on a California-based organization in which the hacker switched a Vietnamese-language keyboard program with a malware program. Printed in The Wall Street Journal, page A10