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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.
WSJ.com

ASIA TECHNOLOGY | APRIL 1, 2010

Google sees Web attack in Vietnam

By JAMES HOOKWAY

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 the second major example in recent months of an Asian country trying to quash dissent on the Internet.

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

McAfee went further, saying on its security blog that the software is an example of a politically motivated cyber attack. 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. McAfee officials couldn't be reached.

Still, the attacks mirror a recent series of similar incidents in China, leading some analysts to suggest that Vietnam—which has launched its own crackdown 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.

Google in January publicized what it said was a series of attacks on accounts on its Gmail email service belonging to journalists and human-rights activists in China, as well as a hacking attack on it and other companies. Combined with growing concerns about censorship, Google last week decided to move its Chinese-language search operations to Hong Kong.

While the Vietnam attacks weren't as sophisticated as those in China, Google's Mr. Mehta wrote, they represent another example of how political expression is vulnerable to the deployment of malicious software and other hacking techniques.

Internet use in Vietnam has mushroomed in recent years. Vietnam's communications ministry says around a quarter of the country's 86 million people regularly surf the Web. While initially welcoming this rush of online activity, Vietnam's authorities have shown concern about how it can be used to spread criticism of government policies and agitate in favor of 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. 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, and that Web site remains difficult to access in Vietnam.

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 in a coordinated crackdown on dissidents, analysts and diplomats say.

Vietnam's plans to develop a bauxite mine in the country's environmentally sensitive Central Highlands region has proved to be a magnet for dissent, both online and otherwise.

Police last year detained several bloggers for criticizing the government's plans to develop the mine 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 an influx of Chinese workers and growing Chinese influence in Vietnam. The two countries fought a border war in 1979 and continue to wrangle over control of islands in the South China Sea.

In December, an activist Web site called bauxitevietnaminfo.com was hacked, and McAfee said the attacks began around the same time. Mr. Kurtz said somebody broke into a Web site run by a California-based organization called the Vietnamese Professionals Society that was founded to promote better awareness of social and political issues in Vietnam. The hacker switched a Vietnamese-language keyboard program that can be downloaded from the site with a malware program.

Google's Mr. Mehta said computers attempting to download the keyboard software were infected with the malware. "These 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. The group couldn't be reached Wednesday.

Some of the country's largest trading partners already have expressed their concern about Vietnam's increasingly conservative tendencies as it struggles to deal with rising inflation and a widening trade deficit. Vietnam's finance ministry is considering proposals to introduce price controls on foreign and private companies selling goods such as gasoline, milk and building materials to help cap rising costs.

U.S. Ambassador Michael Michalak in December told a donor conference that the Internet curbs were hindering the expansion of commerce in the country.

Printed in The Wall Street Journal Asia, page 1

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