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India blocks more than 250 Web sites for inciting hate, panic

By [Rama Lakshmi](#), Published: August 20

NEW DELHI — India blocked about 250 Web sites and social networking sites Monday, accusing them of spreading inflammatory content that [triggered panic](#) among thousands of workers and students from the country's eight northeastern states last week.

The government's blame list ranged from Facebook to fundamentalist Pakistani sites, Twitter to text messages, and Google to YouTube videos. Authorities also barred the sending of text messages to more than five people at a time for two weeks.

Thousands of people from northeastern India fled several cities in the south and west of the country last week after text messages circulated warning that they faced reprisal attacks from Muslims over recent ethnic clashes in the northeastern state of Assam.

The government said a number of Web sites had deliberately tried to inflame passions, hosting [morphed videos of violence](#) against Muslims in Burma and asserting that they were filmed in Assam. The images went viral and provoked riots by Muslim residents of Mumbai just over a week ago.

"We have blocked a number of sites. We have also identified a number of sites which were uploaded from Pakistan," Home Secretary R. K. Singh told reporters in New Delhi on Monday.

Pakistani Interior Minister Rehman Malik has asked India for evidence about the alleged Pakistani Web sites, which Singh said he would share.

Although some analysts said the curbs were justified because the sites posed a threat to public order, others said the actions were a knee-jerk response from a weak government unable to effectively assuage the concerns of its frightened citizens.

"This is a government that is trying to hide its incompetence by blaming everybody but unwilling to



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look at itself for failure to protect its citizens,” said a government official who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he is not authorized to talk to the media.

Others said that by cracking down on Web sites and social media, the government was dodging the deeper issue of the racism and alienation felt by many people from the northeastern states, who are routinely denigrated by their fellow Indians for supposedly being more Chinese or Southeast Asian in appearance.

But India’s [relationship with Internet freedom](#) has become increasingly troubled.

In the past year, the government has locked horns with Google, Yahoo and Facebook, as well as with local activists and bloggers, over censorship and content screening. Analysts then accused the government of trying to silence middle-class critics at the height of a national [anti-corruption movement](#).

The government has been holding public meetings on [proposed rules](#) to prohibit Web sites and service providers from hosting information that could be regarded as “harmful,” “blasphemous” or “insulting.”

Last year, India topped the list of countries that routinely ask Internet companies to remove content, according to the Google Transparency Report.

Although Internet penetration is still low in India, the country has the third-largest number of Web users in the world, with more than 100 million people accessing the Internet. A [new report says](#) that Indians spend one in every four minutes online visiting social networking sites.

Some free-speech activists fear the events of last week may have provided the government the justification it was seeking to increase Web censorship.

“I have fears that the present situation should not cause a disproportionate response which affects freedom of speech online,” said Apar Gupta, a lawyer and advocate for free speech online. “Historically, a national security argument is very tough to dislodge the competing interests of freedom of speech.”

Other advocates of Internet freedom say the government is justified in the crackdown but could have opted for a more nuanced approach.

“A blanket ban does not necessarily lead to a reduction in the circulation of rumors because people become more vulnerable in a communication vacuum,” said Sunil Abraham, executive director of the Center for Internet and Society, an advocacy group based in the southern city of Bangalore, which experienced a mass exodus of frightened northeasterners last week.

Abraham said the government sent out broad instructions to Web sites to block all hate speech, without giving specific definitions or examples. “The government could have done this in a more sophisticated manner, like putting up banner notices on Facebook and Twitter; blocking text messages that had certain key words; or warning the sites to proactively dismantle some content.”

The Indian Department of Electronics and Information Technology [said in a statement](#) Monday that it had been working with international social networking sites on the issue but that “a lot more and quicker action is expected from them to address such a sensitive issue.”

A Google India official said that “content intended to incite violence is prohibited on YouTube, and we act quickly to remove such material flagged by our users.”

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