

New report pins gov't on illegal internet monitoring

BY GEORGE MANGULA

Internet users in Uganda face tough times ahead if the recent report accusing government of illegally monitoring them is to go by.

The right to privacy and Internet freedom are facing enormous threats as the Ugandan government starts to install surveillance equipment in the security agencies to monitor internet users in the country the report, authored by the Unwanted Witness, says.

The Unwanted Witness, a human rights-based organisation, in its report released last week indicates that the State House Entebbe was the first to be equipped with surveillance equipment with capabilities of undertaking surveillance on over ten mobile phone subscribers at ago.

"It irritates to witness the diminishing of the enjoyments of human rights in Uganda. The trends we are taking as a country is to obstruct and control the enjoyments of these rights and freedoms," said Jeff Ssebagala,

the Unwanted Witness Chief Executive Officer.

Offline rights and freedoms are the causality of the day including assembly, expression and association having been excessively limited and now internet freedoms are being targeted, he said

The research carried out from November 2013 to January 2014 aimed to understand online threats and risks faced by Human rights Defenders, Netizen, Bloggers, journalists, artists and poets among other internet users.

It shows that Internet monitoring units have been established in major security agencies including the Uganda Police Force, Chieftaincy of Military Intelligence and State House among others.

The report, titled "The Internet: They Are Coming For It Too," released in Kampala as part of activities to mark the Internet Freedom Day, 2014,

held on the January 18 every year worldwide, expressed fears that as government moves to undertake systematic

the targeted group. The report noted that in the bid to regulate activities in the cyber space the government

other than facilitating the enjoyment of freedoms of expression, speech, association, assembly and access

It urges government to emplace measures that aim at implementing the UN resolution on protection of the right to privacy in the digital age.

It also demands a review of all laws enacted to regulate online and make necessary amendments that will see the legal framework facilitating the enjoyment of online freedoms rather than control.

Internet penetration in Uganda has grown steadily following the deregulation and liberalization of the information and communication technology (ICT) sector in 1997.

That ushered in reductions in mobile telephone tariffs and bandwidth prices, as well as greater availability of fiber optics bandwidth, increased ICT literacy, and supportive government-led ICT policies.

As a result, the number of internet users hit over six million as of December 31, 2012.



Internet users in an internet cafe

surveillance, most internet users especially Human Rights Defenders and bloggers are unaware of their being spied on by the government.

"They lack the capacity to protect themselves while online and who to hold accountable for such actions; and many noted that they were never consulted during the legislative processes of laws on enacted to regulate internet activities," the report said of

enacted more than five (5) legislations in a period of less than four years including; the Computer Misuse Act, Electronic Signatures Act, Uganda Communications Act, Regulation to Interception of Communications' Act, and Electronic Transactions Act among others.

However, there's a fear that the legal framework was drafted to undertake and strengthen the control over the internet

to information online.

These rights are not only guaranteed by the 1995 constitution but also provided under various international human rights instruments to which Uganda is a signatory.

The Unwanted Witness says the Uganda Government is under obligation to protect its people from surveillance and should protect their right to privacy and that it should enact a data protection, surveillance and privacy law.