

Pakistan defers 'obscene' text message ban deadline

Pakistan's mobile operators on Monday deferred implementing a ban on nearly 1700 "obscene" words from text messages, saying they were seeking further clarification from the telecoms authority.

The list, including words from "quickie" to "fairy" to "Jesus Christ" and obtained by AFP, was distributed on November 14 with operators given seven days to comply, but has met with widespread derision and a threat of legal action.

Although the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) has previously blocked websites deemed pornographic or offensive to Islam, it is the first time the country has sought to censor text messages. "Obviously there are concerns and we have some reservations," said Omar Manzur, spokesman for Mobilink, the country's leading telecoms operator.

"This regulation will be implemented only after mutual agreement between the PTA and us. We should wait until the end of this discussion," Manzur told AFP..

An official at one telecoms firm told AFP that filtering the system could degrade the quality of network services and greatly inconvenience subscribers if text messages were not delivered due to the wrong choice of words.

No clarification yet as to when the ban will be instituted

A spokesman for rival company Telenor said he was "not in a position to say when this (ban) will be implemented".

"If this is a regulation and a law then we have to implement it but so far we are in discussions," Sohaib Mustafa, the Telenor spokesman, told AFP.

In addition to more conventional obscenities, other words and phrases on the list of 1,695 terms, issued in English and Urdu, include "monkey crotch", "athlete's foot", "idiot" and "damn", as well as "deeper", "four twenty", "go to hell", "harder", "looser" and "no sex".

The PTA denied that Monday marked any formal deadline on the ban as messages containing the words were still transmitted. "There were two weekly holidays on 19 and 20 November (the Saturday-Sunday weekend) and there are still two days left to complete this seven-day period," Mohammad Younis Khan told AFP.

Challenge in the offing

He acknowledged the "reservations" of telecoms companies and said the PTA was "ready to sort that out through mutual discussions". The letter accompanying the list of banned words said the move was legal under the Pakistan

Telecommunication Act of 1996 which prohibits people from transmitting messages that are "false, fabricated, indecent, or obscene".

However, campaign group Bytes for All has said it will challenge the order in court, saying "a new, ruthless wave of moral policing" violated rights to free speech and privacy, and made a mockery of the entire country. Pakistan blocked Facebook for nearly two weeks in May 2010 in a storm of controversy about a competition to draw the Prophet Mohammed and has restricted access to hundreds of websites because of blasphemy.

The country briefly banned YouTube in February 2008 during a similar outcry against cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed.

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