

Amnesty: Web Companies Violating Rights

(AP) -- Amnesty International accused Yahoo, Microsoft and Google on Thursday of violating human rights principles by cooperating with China's efforts to censor the Web and called on them to lobby for the release of jailed cyber-dissidents.

The London-based human rights group also called on the Internet companies to publicly oppose Chinese government requests that violate human rights standards.

"The Internet should promote free speech, not restrict it. We have to guard against the creation of two Internets - one for expression and one for repression," said Larry Cox, executive director of Amnesty's U.S. branch, in a statement.

The companies "have violated their stated corporate values and policies" in their pursuit of China's booming Internet market, the statement said. It appealed to them to "call for the release of `cyber-dissidents.'"

Google Inc. and the Chinese partner that runs Yahoo Inc.'s China operation, Alibaba.com, defended their activities and said their presence benefits China's public.

Google said in a written statement that its search engine discloses when results have been removed "in response to local laws and regulations" and that the company avoids offering services when it can't guarantee users' privacy.

Alibaba.com didn't respond directly to Amnesty's criticism but said its focus is on Internet commerce, not news and information.

"By creating opportunities for entrepreneurs and connecting China's exporters to buyers around the world, Alibaba.com and Yahoo China are having an overwhelmingly positive impact on the lives of average people in China," said Porter Erisman, an Alibaba.com spokesman, in a written statement.

A spokesman for Microsoft Corp. didn't immediately respond to requests for comment.

China has the world's second-largest population of Internet users after the United States, with 123 million people online. Though the communist government promotes Internet use, it has also set up an extensive surveillance and filtering system to prevent Chinese from accessing material considered obscene or politically subversive.

The Amnesty statement appealed to Internet companies to reveal details of their dealings with Chinese authorities and to exhaust all judicial appeals before complying with government requests that might affect human rights, such as the release of e-mail account information.

A growing number of Chinese journalists and others have been jailed for posting politically oriented comments online and other Internet-related activities.

Yahoo has been the most severely criticized after the Sunnyvale, Calif.-based company's China operation provided information on e-mail users that was used to sentence two dissidents to prison.

Google has been criticized for censoring search results on its China site. Microsoft has banned terms such as "human rights" from its Chinese Web log service and shut down the U.S.-based log of a Chinese blogger at Beijing's request.

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