

New law will let govt snoop on your PC

NEW DELHI: Your email or the personal contents of your computer could soon be under the government's scrutiny without your knowledge.

With Parliament on Tuesday passing a bill which stipulates life imprisonment for those indulging in cyber terrorism and giving the government endless power to "intercept or monitor any information through any computer resource," experts fear that "unauthorised interceptions could soon become common".

Calling for setting up of an independent authority to review complaints of unauthorised interceptions, cyber law expert Pavan Duggal told TOI that the bill was bound to infringe on civil liberties like right to privacy or right to anonymous communication with legitimate purposes, because no safeguards had been put in place to prevent such abuse.

Calling the bill "a hurried reaction", Duggal said, "The potential for misuse of these powers stipulated by the bill for political gains can't be ruled out."

There also appears to be no effective remedy or mechanism to appeal against unauthorised interception, Duggal said. "Once it becomes law, the government will have sovereign and blanket power to intercept or peep into any electronic communication of even legitimate citizens. Because the bill states that safeguards would be stipulated at a later date, it would clamp down on civil liberties right away. While we are concerned about national security, we don't want these interception mechanisms to become a handle for misuse," he added.

"There has to be a proper balance between contradictory subjects of interception and privacy. So safeguards are critical," the expert said. The Information Technology (Amendment) Bill 2008 also empowers the government with absolute power to block websites in national interest.

The government's move to bring in new provisions to tackle cyber terrorism comes after repeated instances of terrorists using the web to propagate mayhem and claim responsibility after every act.

For those indulging in cyber terrorism, the new legislation provides for stiff penalty of life imprisonment. The bill also says that dishonestly receiving stolen computer resource, identity theft, cheating by personation by using computer resource and violation of privacy will result in

imprisonment upto three years apart from fine between Rs 1 lakh to Rs 10 lakh.

Transmitting material containing sexually explicit acts in electronic form would be punishable by imprisonment of upto five years along with a fine of upto Rs 10 lakh.

Emphasising on the overriding power given to government, a senior IT official pointed out that Section 69 of the original Act had given the central government the power to intercept and monitor any information through computer systems in national interest, permitting it to monitor any potentially cognisable offence.

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