

GOVERNMENT OF INDIA
MINISTRY OF ELECTRONICS AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY
RAJYA SABHA
UNSTARRED QUESTION NO.516
TO BE ANSWERED ON: 21.11.2019

PRIVACY BREACH OF INDIANS BY WHATSAPP

516. SHRI RAVI PRAKASH VERMA:

Will the Minister of Electronics & Information Technology be pleased to state:-

- (a) whether privacy breach of Indians by WhatsApp have been reported recently;
- (b) if so, the details thereof;
- (c) whether WhatsApp had alerted Government about privacy breach of Indians in May and September, 2019;
- (d) if so, the details thereof; and
- (e) the details of action Government had taken on the alerts by WhatsApp?

ANSWER

MINISTER OF STATE FOR ELECTRONICS AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY
(SHRI SANJAY DHOTRE)

(a) to (e): Government had been informed by WhatsApp of a vulnerability affecting some WhatsApp mobile user's devices through a spyware namely Pegasus. According to WhatsApp, this spyware was developed by an Israel based company NSO Group and that it had developed and used Pegasus spyware to attempt to reach mobile phones of a possible number of 1400 users globally that includes 121 users from India.

The Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In) published a vulnerability note on May 17, 2019 advising countermeasures to users regarding the above said vulnerability in WhatsApp. Subsequently, on May 20, 2019 WhatsApp reported an incident to the CERT-In stating that WhatsApp had identified and promptly fixed a vulnerability that could enable an attacker to insert and execute code on mobile devices and that the vulnerability can no longer be exploited to carry out attacks.

On September 5, 2019 WhatsApp wrote to CERT-In mentioning an update to the security incident reported in May 2019, that while the full extent of this attack may never be known, WhatsApp continued to review the available information. It also mentioned that WhatsApp believes it is likely that devices of approximately one hundred and twenty one users in India may have been attempted to be reached. Based on media reports on 31st October, 2019, about such targeting of mobile devices of Indian citizens through WhatsApp by spyware Pegasus, CERT-In has issued a formal notice to WhatsApp seeking submission of relevant details and information.
