

GOVERNMENT OF INDIA
MINISTRY OF ELECTRONICS AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY
LOK SABHA
UNSTARRED QUESTION NO. 3686
TO BE ANSWERED ON: 11.12.2019

HACKING OF WHATSAPP PLATFORM

3686. SHRI ANUMULA REVANTH REDDY:

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

- (a) whether the social media platform WhatsApp was hacked to spy on Indian activists, Journalists and Lawyers and if so, the details thereof;
- (b) the details of the reply/comments received by the Government from the said platform on this issue;
- (c) whether the Government has written to the NSO group asking for a reply on the aforesaid issue and if so, the details thereof and if not, the reasons therefor; and
- (d) the results of investigation conducted by the Government in this regard?

ANSWER

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

(a): Government had been informed by WhatsApp of a vulnerability affecting some WhatsApp mobile users' 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. Some statements have appeared based on reports in media, regarding breach of privacy of Indian citizens on WhatsApp. These attempts to malign the Government of India for the reported breach are completely misleading. The Government is committed to protect the fundamental rights of citizens, including the right to privacy. The Government operates strictly as per provisions of law and laid down protocols. There are adequate safeguards to ensure that no innocent citizen is harassed or his privacy breached.

(b) to (d): On May 20, 2019 WhatsApp reported an incident to the Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (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. However, CERT-In has already published a vulnerability note on May 17, 2019 advising countermeasures to users regarding the above said vulnerability in WhatsApp.

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 news and information in public and media on snooping of mobile devices of Indian citizens through WhatsApp by spy software

Pegasus, CERT-In has sought submission of relevant details and information from WhatsApp and NSO group.
