GOVERNMENT OF INDIA
MINISTRY OF ELECTRONICS AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY
RAJYA SABHA
UNSTARRED QUESTION NO. 519
TO BE ANSWERED ON: 21.11.2019

SPYWARE ATTACK BY ISRAELI SOFTWARE

519.   SHRI M. P. VEERENDRA KUMAR:

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

(a) whether Government is aware of the serious breach of privacy of the citizens by an Israeli developed spyware named Pegasus;
(b) if so, the details thereof including the modus operandi of Pegasus; and
(c) whether Government has taken the help of any cyber companies to fight terrorism in the country and if so, the details thereof?

ANSWER

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

(a) and (b): . 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.

As per WhatsApp, during April 2019 and May 2019, NSO group found and exploited a vulnerability in WhatsApp Video calling system, to send malware to the mobile devices of a WhatsApp users. The nature of the attack did not require targeted users to answer the calls they received. It has been alleged by WhatsApp that "spyware" was designed to intercept and extract information and communications from mobile phones and devices. The spyware could be installed in mobile working on Android, iOS, and BlackBerry operating systems.

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.

(c): Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) regularly interacts with technology companies and their industry associations. MeitY has specifically not sought help of any cyber company to fight terrorism.

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