

GOVERNMENT OF INDIA
MINISTRY OF ELECTRONICS AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY
RAJYA SABHA
UNSTARRED QUESTION NO.513
TO BE ANSWERED ON: 21.11.2019

ILLEGAL SURVEILLANCE BY ISRAELI SPYWARE PEGASUS

513. SHRI SANJAY RAUT:
SHRI RITABRATA BANERJEE:

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

- (a) whether it is a fact that many Indian journalists and activists were targets of illegal surveillance by Israeli spyware Pegasus through WhatsApp for a two week period until May, 2019;
- (b) if so, Government's reaction thereto on breach of privacy of citizens of India on the messaging platform WhatsApp; and
- (c) the details of steps taken/proposed to be taken against WhatsApp and other spyware companies to safeguard the privacy of millions of Indian citizen?

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.

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.

(c) : The Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In) published a vulnerability note on May 17, 2019 advising countermeasures to users regarding the abovesaid vulnerability in WhatsApp. Subsequently, on May 20, 2019, WhatsApp reported an incident to 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.
