

Burma's Ministry of Post and Telecommunications (MPT) has sealed off Internet access for Internet cafes and businesses, according to experts on Burma's Internet infrastructure.

Sources close to the ministry who asked to maintain anonymity have told The Irrawaddy that Internet access is normal at all government and military institutions serviced by MPT, but "access for businesses and Internet cafes" is shut down to control the flow of information in and out of the country.

MPT is connected to the SEA-ME-WE-3 undersea cable and is estimated to have about 45mbps in bandwidth which it shares with Bagan Cybertech, and it has an additional 15mbps satellite connection.

Recently, Burmese Internet users have reported Internet connections had failed or slowed down considerably.

Journalists and global media watchdogs have raised concerns that the Burmese regime would likely seal off the Internet during the upcoming election, the first nationwide election in 20 years, by cutting off Internet access and phone lines.

Reporters Without Borders and the Burma Media Association both predicted that the military junta would seal off the country for the elections, as the current slowdown in Internet connections now suggests.

"This would leave the junta's hands free to crack down if the results give rise to protests," the groups said in a recent press release.

No official announcement from MPT has been released, but comments by some of Burma's Internet users suggested that "the Internet server was attacked by a distributed denial of service attack (DDoS)."

The experts were laughing. One said simply: "DDoS attacks can only damage a website. Not a server. There is no news about damage to the undersea cable. So sealing off Internet access to the public must be the only answer."

Burma has two Internet Service Providers—the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications (MPT) and the semi-private Bagan Cybertech (BC). Connections to all government and military institutions are made by MPT, while corporate and personal subscribers account for the majority of BC's users.

Observers said that ahead of this weekend's election, the military junta is working to make it difficult for journalists and the public to get images and news out of the country through the Internet.

The junta aggressively censors the Internet, routinely blocking politically sensitive websites. During a crackdown on pro-democracy protesters in 2007, the junta completely cut access to the Internet and closed down many cybercafes.

According to a report by The Associated Press on Monday, hotels and travel agents that rely on the Internet for business say the slowdown began a week ago and many are advising travelers that Internet connections cannot be guaranteed for at least a week.

Some sources also reported poor telephone connections starting on Monday.

Meanwhile, Burma's Union Election Commission announced that no media or photography will be allowed inside or around polling stations during the general election on Nov. 7.

According to Reporters Without Border, several European journalists were told that their requests for tourist visas were rejected by the authorities.

"The Burmese diplomats have clearly learned to use Google and are rejecting applications by people who are identifiable as journalists," a French reporter said.

Foreign journalists have for decades found it extremely difficult to obtain press visas for Burma and have been forced to travel under tourist visas.

Reporters Without Border concluded that the developments "reinforces the impression that the military government intends to isolate the country for the election."

In its Press Freedom Index 2010, Reporters Without Borders ranked Burma as an "Enemy of the Internet." On Oct. 20, it listed Burma as one of the 10 worst countries in the world to work as a journalist.