

Myanmar authorities unblock some banned websites

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YANGON, Myanmar ♦ Myanmar's new government has stopped blocking some foreign websites such as the BBC and YouTube in a gesture toward openness that is tempered by remaining harsh laws that still keep readers of such sites at risk of arrest.

Once-banned websites that were opened this week for viewing include the Voice of America and the British Broadcasting Corp., as well the Democratic Voice of Burma, Radio Free Asia and the video file sharing site YouTube.

The unannounced move is the latest step taken by the Southeast Asian nation's new leaders to boost hope, however faint, that authoritarian rule here could finally be easing. The country's long-standing military government handed over power to a nominally civilian regime earlier this year.

Since authorities introduced the Internet here about a decade ago, Myanmar – also known as Burma ♦ has aggressively monitored online activities and routinely blocked websites seen as critical to the government.

It has also punished journalists with harsh jail terms; the Democratic Voice of Burma says around 25 journalists are currently detained in Myanmar, 17 of them its own.

Many news websites have been blocked since 2007, when the military junta launched a bloody crackdown on pro-democracy protesters, but local Internet users have been able to circumvent the ban by using proxy servers.

Wai Phyo, chief editor of a prominent private Weekly Eleven news journal, welcomed the government move, saying it would allow journalists to be of "greater service to the people."

However, Shawn W. Crispin, Southeast Asia Representative of the Committee to Protect Journalists, warned that the opening could be a double-edged sword.

"There are still regulations on the books that will allow authorities to arrest and charge anyone who dares to access these sites in Burma's highly regulated and strictly policed public Internet cafes," Crispin told The Associated Press on Friday in Bangkok. "These sites may now be available in Burma, but Internet users risk arrest and even prison for accessing them."

Crispin said that less than 0.3 percent of the population in Myanmar has access to the media. Allowing them full Internet access "is hardly a noteworthy move toward more press freedom," he said.

"Until Burma's military-backed regime stops pre-censoring the local media and releases all the journalists it holds behind bars, Burma will remain one of the most restricted media environments in the world," he said.

This week, journalist Sithu Zeya of the Norway-based news broadcaster Democratic Voice of Burma was sentenced to a 10-year-prison term for circulating material online that could "damage tranquillity and unity in the government" under the country's Electronic Act, Reporters Without Borders said.

Sithu Zeya had already been sentenced in 2010 to eight years behind bars after he was caught photographing the aftermath of a grenade attack in the country's main city of Yangon.

This week, the new U.S. special representative to Myanmar ended a brief visit to Myanmar, saying America plans to keep its sanctions on the military-dominated country for now, but Washington will respond positively if the new civilian government makes genuine reforms.

President Thein Sein said in his inaugural address in March that the role of the media should be respected. In August, three state-run newspapers stopped running back-page slogans blasting the foreign media for the first time in years.

Associated Press writer Todd Pitman contributed to this report from Bangkok.