

Is Facebook About to Get Dangerous for Outspoken Christians?

Facebook has assured Pakistan that concerns about blasphemous content on the social media site will be addressed and a company delegation will visit this week to discuss the issue with the government, the interior minister said on Tuesday.

Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif earlier this month ordered that blasphemous content on social media be removed or blocked, and that anyone posting such material be punished, and the government requested a meeting with Facebook.

Blasphemy is a criminal offense in the strictly Islamic country and can carry the death penalty.

Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan, quoting from what he said was a letter from Facebook's vice president received a day earlier, told reporters: "I wanted to reiterate that Facebook takes the concerns raised by the Pakistani government very seriously. We have also committed our representative to meet with you and senior officials of your government."

Khan described this message as a "very big improvement" from Facebook as, he said, the U.S. social media giant generally had not responded to such complaints in the past.

He said Facebook through Pakistan's ambassador in the United States has told him that over the past few months it had blocked 62 blasphemous webpages, 45 in the past several days alone.

"We see it very positively that at the highest level, Facebook has responded and takes this issue seriously."

He said Pakistan's Washington ambassador had spoken to the FBI

and Justice Department to underline Islamabad's concerns and both agencies had been receptive.

There was no immediate comment from Facebook.

Last week, Khan warned he would close social media sites that fail to prevent online blasphemy, but gave no details.

Facebook data indicate the social media app has about 25-30 million active users in Pakistan even though internet penetration remains poor in the South Asian nation. Facebook's Instagram unit and rival Twitter are also popular.

The ruling PML-N party's tough talk against blasphemy will appeal to its conservative voter base ahead of elections likely to take place next year.

At least 65 people, including lawyers, defendants and judges, have been murdered by Islamist militants over blasphemy allegations in Pakistan since 1990, according to think-tank figures and local media. {eo}

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