

Pakistan to Punish Facebook, Twitter for not Removing Islamic Blasphemy

Pakistan will punish social media companies that fail to take action against online blasphemy, the interior minister said on Wednesday, adding that he had requested a meeting with Facebook.

Pakistan's government wants social media networks to remove material deemed insulting to Islam or the Prophet Mohammad, and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif last week warned those posting such content would be "strictly punished."

"(Blasphemy) is not only a problem for Pakistan. This is an issue about the honor of every Muslim," said Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan, who is also seeking to meet ambassadors from other Muslim countries to tackle the problem.

"If we do not get a response from social media, I do not care about anyone; there is nothing greater than our faith. If social media and especially international social media stays on this route, then we will have to take strong action regarding social media."

He did not specify what action might be taken.

Those convicted of blasphemy can face the death penalty under Pakistani law. Right groups say the law is frequently abused in a country where Islam is a highly sensitive subject, and where even rumors of blasphemy have sparked deadly riots.

Facebook is the most popular social network in Pakistan. Khan said the company was "ready to send a delegation to Pakistan" and would do so once a date was agreed.

Facebook could not be immediately reached for comment.

However, a report by the company on Pakistani government requests for data lists 25 pieces of content being restricted between January and June 2016.

“Based on legal requests from the Pakistan Telecom Authority, we restricted access to content for allegedly violating local laws prohibiting blasphemy, desecration of the national flag and condemnation of the country’s independence,” reads the Facebook page on Pakistan.

According to analytics data from Facebook’s website, the social media app has about 25-30 million active users in Pakistan, where internet penetration remains poor. 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 over blasphemy allegations since 1990, according to figures from a Center for Research and Security Studies report and local media. {eoa}

© 2017 Thomson Reuters. All rights reserved.