

Statement of

The Honorable Tom Coburn

United States Senator
Oklahoma
May 20, 2008

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Hearing: "Global Internet Freedom: Corporate Responsibility and the Rule of Law" Subcommittee on Human Rights and the Law

United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary

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I would like to thank Senator Durbin for holding yet another compelling hearing on issues affecting human rights and the law. Senator Durbin and his staff are truly to be commended for their dedication to issues of such heavy import. This relatively new subcommittee has proven to be quite a force, introducing bipartisan legislation to address genocide, human trafficking, and child soldiers. These bills are already well on the way to bringing justice to victims of the most egregious human rights abuses. The Genocide Accountability Act has already been signed into law, the Child Soldiers Accountability Act passed the Senate by UC, and the Trafficking in Persons Accountability Act awaits consideration by the full Senate after receiving unanimous approval of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

This kind of progress is unusual in today's partisan atmosphere, but Senator Durbin has ensured success by reaching across the aisle to work together to tackle these issues. Under his leadership, we have approached every issue objectively, studying issues closely and talking to experts both at hearings and behind the scenes. In so doing, we have developed reasonable proposals to close gaps in current law that have inadvertently allowed the United States to serve as a safe haven for human rights perpetrators.

Today we address the issue of internet freedom. Nearly one and a half billion people now use the Internet, 220 million of which reside in China. This number has more than doubled since early 2006, when the House of Representatives first held a hearing on this issue. Such growth is explosive, and, amazingly, China now has the largest Internet population in the world. The introduction and widespread use of this technology in countries like China is one of the most exciting developments of our day. Information is power, and the more that Chinese citizens access that information, the more open their society will inevitably be.

Of course, nobody understands the power of the Internet better than the governments who seek to repress those societies. I have already mentioned China, but that country is not the only government with such pernicious censorship. According to Reporters Without Borders, at least 62 cyber-dissidents are currently imprisoned worldwide, while more than 2,600 Web sites, blogs or discussions forums were closed or made inaccessible in 2007.

The group has identified countries where internet freedoms are restricted, which are: China, Cuba, North Korea, Belarus, Myanmar, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Vietnam and Zimbabwe. It named 11 additional countries as "countries under watch." It is my hope that today's hearing will shed light on how pervasive Internet censorship has become around the world.

This is not the first time Congress has addressed the issue of internet freedom. The House of Representatives, led by Congressman Chris Smith and the late Congressman Tom Lantos, held two recent hearings and have thereby created a thorough record for our benefit. I would like to thank my colleagues for their dedication to the issue and for the detailed groundwork they have already laid. The House hearings explored and established the factual record surrounding the relatively short history of American companies that have provided Internet service in countries where censorship is required by law. Those hearings examined in detail the steps and missteps of these companies as they began doing business in unfamiliar territory.

It is my hope that today we will tackle the challenge of discussing possible solutions for the problems that face these companies. While understanding the past is an important aspect of shaping solutions for the future, it is my hope that we can avoid re-litigating the same issues that have already been discussed at length. Our panel of witnesses, which includes industry experts and human rights advocates, should be able to explain the progress that has been made since the last hearing on this issue and answer questions that will help us better understand the challenge of preserving internet freedom around the world.

And while the focus of this hearing is worldwide, it is also my hope that while the eyes of the world are on China -- in its response to the tragic earthquake and in anticipation of the summer Olympics -- China's eyes are also on us, as we criticize government censorship of the Internet and call for more freedom for its citizens. I view this time as an opportunity to show the people of China what freedom looks like, and also to let the Chinese government know that its actions have not gone unnoticed. This is just another opportunity to lead by example, which is what I hope the American internet companies doing business in places like China will also choose to do. Their presence in these places is important, and it is crucial that they operate on the side of those seeking freedom, rather than oppression.

I look forward to the witnesses' testimony.