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Hackistan: Afghan cyber guerrillas step up attacks on Pakistani websites

By Heath Druzin

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The latest weapon fired in the cross-border conflict that has strained relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan was delivered with the click of a mouse, capable only of wounding pride.

In the past few days, a hacker group calling itself the Afghan Cyber Army has defaced roughly 300 Pakistani government and business websites with nationalistic messages decrying rocket attacks that have terrorized Afghan villagers along the Pakistani border. It's the latest in a series of such attacks from the group.

"We want the world to know that the real problem for global security is Pakistan," said a member of the Afghan Cyber Army, reached by telephone in Kabul, who requested anonymity due to security concerns. "Osama bin Laden was in Pakistan, al-Qaida's top leadership is in Pakistan, the Taliban was created in and supported by Pakistan."

Instead of the regular websites displayed at the targeted Pakistani domains, they appeared on Monday with a photo of Afghan soldiers, and the Afghan national anthem played when the pages loaded. The pages also carried a belligerent message from the hacker group that included "This hack is a response to the rocket attacks of Pakistan military on Kunar and Jalalabad provinces of Afghanistan! Next time wait for … bigger damage."

A spokesman for Pakistan's foreign ministry did not respond to requests for comment.

Cross-border attacks have long been a divisive issue, especially in eastern Afghanistan, where thousands of villagers have been displaced and several killed by rockets the Afghan government says come from Pakistan.

Pakistan, for its part, says it has been hit by similar attacks from Afghanistan; each country accuses the other of harboring militants.

At least one Afghan soldier was killed in May in a clash with the Pakistani army that ended with Afghan troops tearing down a disputed Pakistani border post. The death of the soldier led to a swell of nationalism as the incident played out on Afghan news broadcasts.

The cyber attacks come as Afghan and Pakistani media reported that Afghan President Hamid Karzai is planning a trip to Pakistan later this month to mend frayed ties with Afghanistan's neighbor and talk about restarting a faltering peace process with the Taliban, who continue to wage a guerrilla war against Kabul.

The Afghan Cyber Army member interviewed by Stars and Stripes said the group, working out of Afghanistan, is independent and relies on volunteers to carry out the hacking. He promised more and bigger cyber attacks to come.

A spokeswoman for Karzai referred questions to the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology. Aimal Marjan, director of information technology for the ministry, said he is unfamiliar with the Afghan Cyber Army and that Pakistan has not registered a formal complaint about the attacks.

Marjan said that while Afghan law doesn't specifically mention cyber crimes, draft legislation would make such hacking illegal.

Analysts in both Pakistan and Afghanistan downplayed the potential effect on government-to-government relations.

Wahid Mujhda, an independent Afghan political analyst, said as long as the attacks are not connected to the government of Afghanistan, they are unlikely to further the rift between Kabul and Islamabad.

"I don't think it will create enough tension that both [governments] would discuss it," he said.

Hamid Mir, a Pakistani journalist and security analyst, said that while most in the Pakistani government blames such attacks on rival India, they can play to growing mistrust among regular Pakistanis and Afghans.

"On the public level there is a huge trust deficit," he said.