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Ms. Susan Morgan
Executive Director
Global Network Initiative (GNI)
1634 I Street NW
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July 17, 2013

Subject: Facebook's secret censorship deal with the Pakistan government - an open letter

Dear Ms. Morgan,

Bytes for All (B4A), Pakistan is a human rights organization that focuses on the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for democracy, development, and social justice. B4A's efforts in establishing a state of digital rights in Pakistan, including freedom of expression online, privacy rights, and the fight against censorship have been acknowledged on national and international forums.

In continuation with its mission of promoting and protecting these fundamental human rights, B4A is currently in the process of challenging the Government of Pakistan and its relevant agencies through two public interest lawsuits in the Lahore High Court (LHC). These legal petitions focus ongoing Internet censorship, the banning of YouTube, and the enforcement of rampant surveillance across the national cyberspace.

We are writing to you after a startling claim that was made officially in the Lahore High Court on 4th July 2013 by Mr. Waseem Tauqir, Director General (S&D), the representative of Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA), where he claimed that the government of Pakistan has an existing "arrangement" with Facebook, which allows them to have "undesirable" content and Facebook pages blocked as per directions from the Authority. It must be highlighted that "undesirable" is a vague term, and carries no definition, especially when it comes to repressive regimes and authoritarian Internet Governance practices. The court was informed that this exercise of banning and content filtering is done with the assistance of Facebook, which, if true, we believe is betrayal by the company towards the users of Facebook in Pakistan. The claim is upsetting because if true, it breaches the trust of its users, vehemently opposes what Facebook publicly proclaims in its Principles, and is in stark contrast to the social network's commitment to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association as a member of Global Network Initiative (GNI).

What makes this extraordinary turn of events even more disturbing is the fact that several important Facebook pages focusing on alternate discourse have recently become inaccessible, blocked or removed from Facebook in Pakistan. We strongly protest against such incidents of censorship and Internet filtering and note that this has been done without any legal process or notice to the content owners. The nature of the technology used to block these pages and the reasons behind their removal has also not been made available to the citizens. As an organization that promotes digital rights, freedom of expression, and access to information in Pakistan, we have been trying tirelessly to get these answers.

While we are not yet aware of the scale of this banning and filtering exercise agreement between Facebook and Pakistani Government authorities, we feel that some of the known blocked pages are essential for the promotion of peace, harmony and alternate narratives in the country. We reaffirm the fact that unhindered accessibility of such pages on the Internet is very much in tune with the ideals of freedom of speech, opinion,

expression and assembly that the Internet represents and GNI promotes through its charter and principles to which Facebook must have signed before becoming a member.

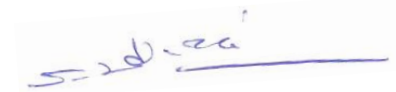
We warmly welcomed and celebrated GNI's announcement at the Stockholm Internet Forum this year that Facebook has joined GNI. We hoped that this development would result in more open and transparent content management operations in the company. As the largest social network, both in Pakistan and the global cyberspace, we feel that Facebook following its own principles and the principles of GNI can go a long way in ensuring that the citizen's right to access, privacy and freedom of expression are preserved even under hostile and difficult environment.

We understand that a company of Facebook's stature faces a lot of pressure from governments around the world, who are often interested in accessing individuals' private data or in censoring and limiting access to information over vague pretext of national security or any dissenting narratives. However, in a country like Pakistan, where, the authorities are already actively curbing Internet freedom, it is absolutely pertinent that Facebook reveals this secret agreement, if any, that it has reached with the Government of Pakistan. If there's no such arrangement in place, the company needs to publicly state so. This must be done to ensure accountability and transparency of the claims made by the government authorities that may help thwart the possibilities of active censorship and ongoing suppression of political dissent online.

We humbly request you to kindly bring these events to the attention of the Board of Global Network Initiative and Facebook. We sincerely hope that it will help get the details of this arrangement between Facebook and the Government of Pakistan. It will be useful that GNI reviews these details and make them public to gauge its conformity with the ideals promoted by the GNI's charter and Facebook's own principles.

Looking forward to hear from you soon,

Sincerely yours,



Shahzad Ahmad
Country Director, Bytes for All, Pakistan

Copy to:

- The Board Members of Global Network Initiative (GNI)
- Lord Richard Allan, Facebook Inc., UK
- Mr. Frank La Rue, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, UN Human Rights Council
- Mr. Maina Kiai, Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association
- Best Bits Network
- Ms. Anusha Rehman, Minister of State for IT & Telecommunication, Government of Pakistan
- The Chairman, Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, Government of Pakistan