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MegaFon Left Red-Faced After Text-Message Leak

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The Investigative Committee pledged to look into an embarrassing leak that saw about 8,000 text messages by MegaFon users hit the web Monday.

The veritable trove of messages, accessible at a version of MegaFon's web site cached by the Yandex search engine, runs the gamut of emotions, ranging from regular "where are you?" exchanges to tender love notes, accusations of cheating complete with obscenities, invitations to watch movies and requests to feed the cat.

Most messages are ridden with typos and, lacking context, are truly mind-boggling. One text message says, "The little bears have all scampered away because the hedgehogs are silent."

The leaked messages were sent through MegaFon's web site, not via users' cell phones, a Yandex representative told Gazeta.ru.

He blamed MegaFon for the leak, saying the web site's administration should have configured the portal to prevent messages from being indexed.

Yandex cleared its cache of messages a few hours into the scandal, news site Rusnovosti.ru said.

MegaFon said in a vaguely worded statement that the issue was due to "technical malfunction" and was "quickly fixed." The online statement linked the leak to "certain Internet services by Yandex" but did not elaborate or explicitly blame the search engine.

MegaFon also downplayed the leak, saying 8,000 messages were nothing compared with the 2 million texts it handles every hour.

No clients compromised by the leak complained Monday, possibly because many were unaware of it. "I was abroad at the time," a MegaFon user, who identified herself only as Svetlana, said when reached by The Moscow Times through a cell phone number listed by Yandex. She could not recollect the message she had received even when it was read aloud.

Nevertheless, users may sue for damages, said Pyotr Shchelishch, who heads the Russian Consumers Union, Interfax reported. He said his group was already drafting a class action lawsuit, but did not elaborate.

The Investigative Committee said it was looking into the incident but has not opened a case. Gazeta.ru said anyone accused of violating privacy laws in the affair could face up to a year of correctional labor.

MegaFon's main shareholders are Stockholm-based TeliaSonera, billionaire Alisher Usmanov and Alfa Group's Altimo. The company ranked as the country's second-biggest mobile phone operator last year with 52 million users, behind Mobile TeleSystems but ahead of VimpelCom's Beeline.

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