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Uzbekistan Blocks Web Sites of Western, Russian Media

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ALMATY, Kazakhstan — Uzbek authorities have blocked dozens of Internet sites in an apparent attempt to further stem the flow of information into Uzbekistan, online media said Thursday.

Uzbekistan-focused independent news portal UzNews.net said The New York Times and other major Western media outlets have been made unavailable as of this week. It also said that out of 65 Russia-based news web sites, at least 29 appear to have been made unavailable to Internet users inside the country. Uzbeks draw most of the news about their country from Russian-language web sites.

Central Asian news portal Ferghana and the editor of Uzbekistan-based news service Vesti.uz have reported a number of domestic sites going offline. Sites operating from neighboring Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan also appear to have been affected.

Authorities have routinely filtered foreign sites that carry detailed news on Uzbekistan for several years.

Reporters for most major international news agencies, including The Associated Press, are routinely refused accreditation to report from Uzbekistan.

A major wave of censorship was enacted in 2005, after government troops violently suppressed an uprising in the eastern town of Andijan. Authorities say 187 people died, but witnesses and rights activists say the real number was much higher.

The web sites of the BBC and international German broadcaster Deutsche Welle have been blocked for several years, but UzNews says banned sites now also include those of The New York Times, the Financial Times and Reuters news agency.

The blockage of all new sources of information "bears witness to how worried Uzbek authorities are about the influence of the Internet on social activism," said Daniil Kislov, editor of Ferghana, which has also long been inaccessible in Uzbekistan.

Kislov said the Uzbek government is also growing increasingly alarmed at indications that exiled opposition groups are starting to mobilize and at possible incursion from militants in neighboring Afghanistan.

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