Somalia's al-Shabab militia bans Internet

The Washington Post (09.01.2014) - In recent years, Somalia's al-Shabab militia has banned smoking, playing soccer, watching movies, wearing bras, anything it deemed Western. Now, the al-Qaeda-linked group has targeted something else common in most of the rest of the world: the Internet.

In a statement — published on the Internet, of course — the militia said it has disallowed the use of the Internet in areas it controls and gave 15 days for telecommunications operations to comply. To those who refuse, the militia vowed retaliatory measures.

"Services known as mobile internet and fibre optics must be stopped in Somalia," the militia said in a statement issued on the Facebook page of its al-Andalus radio station, according to a translation by the BBC. "Any firm or individual who does not comply will be seen to be working with the enemy and will be dealt with in accordance with Islamic law."

For the past seven years, al-Shabab has sought to overthrow Somalia's Western-backed government, imposing strict interpretations of sharia, or Islamic law, in areas it controls. Today, the militia has lost control of the Somali capital, Mogadishu, and other key cities but remains a potent threat and still controls large swaths of the countryside. It continues to wage an insurgency, marked by suicide attacks and car bombings. In September, al-Shabab asserted responsibility for the siege of the Westgate Premier Shopping Mall in Nairobi, killing and injuring scores.

The Internet ban could very well hurt the militia's ability to address its followers and spread propaganda. The militia frequently uses Facebook, YouTube and Twitter to disseminate its views, including during the assault on the Westgate, where it used Twitter to provide real-time commentary on the militants and the situation inside the mall.

Somalia, a country of about 10 million people that has been besieged by war and famine for more than two decades, has more than 126,000 Internet users, according to Internet World Stats, a Web site that provides data on Internet usage around the world. That figure is expected to grow, as fiber-optic cables are set to be introduced in the country and sizable numbers of the Somali diaspora have returned to seek economic opportunities.

Previous efforts to ban Somalis from using fundamental products of modern life, such as music, cellphone ring tones and money transfer services, have failed. Still, al-Shabab has attacked those who refused to comply with its decrees. In 2010, the militia staged bombings in the Ugandan capital, Kampala, that killed scores of people watching the soccer World Cup.

More recently, the militia set off a bomb outside Somalia's largest bank last year after it refused to stop its operations in areas under the militia's control.