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Flare

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India develops system to tap emails, phone calls

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India has launched a wide-ranging surveillance program that will give its security agencies and even income tax officials the ability to tap directly into e-mails and phone calls without oversight by courts or parliament, several sources said.

The expanded surveillance in the world's most populous democracy, which the government says will help safeguard national security, has alarmed privacy advocates at a time when allegations of massive US digital snooping beyond American shores set off a global furor. "If India doesn't want to look like an authoritarian regime, it needs to be transparent about who will be authorized to collect data, what data will be collected, how it will be used, and how the right to privacy will be protected, Human Rights Watch.

The Central Monitoring System (CMS) was announced in 2011 but there has been no public debate and the government has said little about how it will work or how it will ensure that the system is not abused.

The government started to quietly roll the system out state by state in April this year, according to government officials. Eventually it will be able to target any of India's 900 million landline and mobile phone subscribers and 120 million Internet users.

Interior ministry spokesman KS Dhatwalia said he did not have details of CMS and therefore could not comment on the privacy concerns. A spokeswoman for the telecommunications ministry, which will oversee CMS, did not respond to queries.

Indian officials said making details of the project public would limit its effectiveness as a clandestine intelligence-gathering tool. "Security of the country is very important. All countries have these surveillance programs," said a senior telecommunications ministry official, defending the need for a large-scale eavesdropping system like CMS.

"You can see terrorists getting caught, you see crimes being stopped. You need surveillance. This is to protect you and your country," said the official, who is directly involved in setting up the project.