

## GCHQ: EU surveillance hearing is told of huge cyber-attack on Belgian firm

Belgacom boss says no company or country could have withstood cyber-attack of this size and sophistication

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A cyber-attack on the internet systems of the main Belgian telecommunications company, Belgacom, was so massive and so sophisticated that no company or country would have been able to withstand it, a European parliament committee looking into the mass surveillance operations of the US National Security Agency (NSA) and Britain's GCHQ has been told.

The hearing of the parliament's civil liberties committee was told by Belgacom executives that it did not know the source nor the purpose of the complex hacking operation detected in June. Sophia In't Veld, the Dutch Liberal chairing the session, said it was clear from the evidence that the scale of the attack meant it could only have been performed by a "state actor".

Last month, quoting leaked documents from the NSA whistleblower, Edward Snowden, the German magazine Der Spiegel reported that the Belgacom systems had been infiltrated by GCHQ in what was codenamed Operation Socialist.

An empty seat on the podium was reserved for Sir Iain Lobban, the director of GCHQ, who had been scheduled to appear before the committee but refused. A letter on Tuesday from Sir Jon Cunliffe, the UK ambassador to the EU, obtained by the Guardian, said the GCHQ chief would not be appearing since intelligence and national security were none of the EU's business.

The letter said GCHQ "adheres to strict principles of necessity, proportionality and legality ... and upholds the law at all times, including when dealing with information from outside the UK".

MEPs voiced outrage that the UK government had failed to make anyone available for questioning over the allegations.

While the Belgacom executives and a senior official from Belgium's data protection agency repeatedly emphasised that neither customers' nor citizens' privacy had been compromised by snooping, email surveillance or phonetapping, they also confirmed that the scale of the attack was unprecedented in their experience.

"This is a kind of attack that a single company or country would be unable to withstand on its own," said Dirk Lybaert, Belgacom's secretary general. He spoke of "an attack of such complexity and of such a high level and with such resources behind it".

The executives added that the company believed it had comprehensive security systems in place to counter cyber-attacks, but had been rendered helpless by the scale of the infiltration of 124 Belgacom IT systems.

The Belgian prime minister, Elio Di Rupo, last month complained that the attacks amounted to an assault on the country's integrity and promised a "strong response" if the perpetrators were identified.

Frank Robben, investigating the attack for the national data protection agency, said it was a serious attack, but that the damage had been limited because of "rapid action". That claim was undermined by Belgacom admissions that though the malware intrusion was discovered in June, they did not know when the attack first took place.

Der Spiegel reported that it was initiated three years ago and quoted GCHQ officials as describing the operation as a success.

The executives were at pains to neither deny nor confirm media reports of GCHQ culpability, repeatedly declaring they had no evidence to prove or disprove the reports. Robben admitted that Belgium lacked the right tools and expertise to get to the bottom of the case.

The Labour MEP Claude Moraes and In't Veld complained that the evidence from the Belgians had left them mystified, raising more questions than answers.