GOVT BANS 59 CHINESE APPS ON SECURITY CONCERNS, INCLUDING APPS FROM TIKTOK, XIAOMI

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India on Monday upped the ante against China, announcing a ban on 59 Chinese mobile apps, including Bytedance's TikTok, Alibaba's UC Browser and Tencent's WeChat, citing security concerns.

The apps are "prejudicial to the sovereignty and integrity of India, the defence of India, the security of state and public order", the ministry of information technology said in a statement, which came two weeks after 20 Indian Army personnel were killed in a violent clash on the India-China border in Ladakh.

The move came ahead of military and diplomatic talks between India and China scheduled for later this week.

Tensions have spiralled since early May after hand-to-hand fighting between troops on the banks of Pangong Tso in Ladakh. Tensions then spread across many points along the Line of Actual Control in Ladakh, besides the border in Sikkim, with Beijing amassing large numbers of troops, heavy vehicles and artillery backed by air support along the border with India, which has also mobilized its troops.

With tensions simmering, New Delhi has been mulling punitive economic steps that would hurt Chinese interests. With key countries across the world looking at moving their supply chains out of China in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic, China would not like to see its trade ties with India worth an estimated $90 billion, mostly in China's favour, affected, say analysts.

The apps banned by the IT ministry on Monday included the popular scanning app CamScanner and Mi Video by smartphone maker Xiaomi.

TikTok has more than 200 million users in India and sees the country as one of its most important markets after China. In China, the app operates under a different name, Duyoin.

"There have been raging concerns on aspects relating to data security and safeguarding the privacy of 130 crore Indians. It has been noted recently that such concerns also pose a threat to the sovereignty and security of our country," the statement by the information technology ministry said. It said the ministry had received several complaints from various sources on the misuse of some mobile apps available on Android and iOS platforms that steal and "surreptitiously" transmit users' data in an unauthorized manner to servers located outside the country.

"The compilation of these data, its mining and profiling by elements hostile to national security and defence of India, which ultimately impinges on the sovereignty and integrity of India, is a matter of very deep and immediate concern, which requires emergency measures," the ministry said.

This seemed specifically targeted at TikTok that was recently found accessing user data on Apple's iPhones.

Analysts said such steps are now increasingly in the realm of expectations. "India will have to

take policy decisions of this kind. This is the first in what is likely to be a series of such decisions. It cannot be business as usual," said former Indian ambassador to China, Pakistan and Bhutan, Gautam Bambawale.

ShareChat, a direct competitor of Helo in India—also owned by Bytedance—welcomed the move. "This is a welcome move from the government against platforms that have had serious privacy, cybersecurity and national security risks. We expect the government to continue their support for the Indian startup ecosystem" said Berges Malu, director-public policy at Bengaluru-based ShareChat.

Monday's move also follows foreign minister S. Jaishankar's warning in a telephone call to his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi on 17 June, of a "serious impact on the bilateral relationship" following the deaths of the 20 Indian army personnel.

Elizabeth Roche contributed to this story.

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