Internet disruptions expected to persist until October: PTA

Pakistan is experiencing a nationwide internet outage that is likely to extend for more than a

month. The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) announced on Wednesday that the

issue stems from a malfunction in a submarine cable. They estimate that repairs for the affected

SMW-4 submarine cable will not be completed until early October. This prolonged disruption has

sparked a significant backlash from the public and the IT industry. Critics are suggesting that the

slowdown is linked to the government's testing of a new internet firewall designed to control

social media content. This firewall, equipped with filters to block certain online material, has been

criticised for its potential impact on internet speed and connectivity. Previously, the PTA

attributed the internet slowdown to faults in two of the seven international submarine cables

connecting Pakistan. The PTA's recent statement confirms that while repairs on the SMW-4 cable

are ongoing, the AAE-1 cable has been fixed, which should provide some improvement in internet performance. PTA Chairman Maj Gen (retd) Hafeezur Rehman recently acknowledged that the upgrade of the National Firewall System (NFS), also known as the Web Management System (WMS), is underway. This system aims to regulate or remove content from social media platforms based on directives from the government or courts. Rehman highlighted that the project for upgrading the NFS was approved in March 2019, during the tenure of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government. The PTA chief also noted that the social media platform X (formerly Twitter) was banned for non-compliance with government directives, as there are established legal procedures for enforcing such measures. In response to the disruptions, the National Assembly's Standing Committee on Information Technology rejected any attempts to slow down the internet or ban social media platforms. The committee has instructed the Ministry of IT to assess the financial impact on the IT sector and report back. Industry groups such as the Wireless and Internet Service Providers Association of Pakistan (WISPAP) and the Pakistan Software Houses Association (P@SHA) have expressed strong criticism of the government, citing severe economic repercussions for freelancers, IT professionals, and the broader digital economy. However, the government has denied any involvement in intentionally disrupting internet services. State Minister for Information Technology Shaza Fatima Khawaja suggested that the

slowdown might be due to the widespread use of VPNs by users.