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Launching the first national cyber security centre

The first national cyber security centre at GCHQ (Cheltenham).

Security minister Alan West said hostile states and criminals were increasingly attacking British interests online.

"We know that various state actors are very interested in cyber warfare," West, a junior minister at the Home Office, told reporters. *"The terrorist aspect of this is the least (concern), but it is developing."*

It was *"horribly easy"* for online data to be obtained illicitly, he said. "It's becoming a bigger and bigger issue."

Several countries, including the United States, have voiced concern over Russia's and China's abilities to spy electronically on them and disrupt computer networks.

West declined to identify specific countries he suspected of using computers to spy on Britain. But he quoted from a 2007 speech by the head of the MI5 security service, Jonathan Evans, who said a number of countries including Russia and China were making *"unreconstructed attempts"* to spy on Britain.

In the same speech, Evans added that several unnamed countries increasingly made *"sophisticated technical attacks, using the internet to penetrate computer networks."*

Prime Minister Gordon Brown said in a statement that Britain had to secure cyberspace to operate safely there *"as in the 19th century we had to secure the seas for our national safety and prosperity and in the 20th century we had to secure the air."*

West said Britain was coordinating its strategy closely with the United States, where President Barack Obama plans to name a White House-level czar to lead anti-cybercrime measures.

Kilian Strauss, an official of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, told Reuters in November cybercrime was estimated to cause \$100 billion (61 billion pounds) in global damage annually.

West offered few details of the strategy, but said that in September new bodies would start work to reinforce protection of the electronic transactions that formed the backbone of the country's economic infrastructure.

These were an Office of Cyber Security to coordinate measures across government departments and a Cyber Security Operations Centre to coordinate the protection of major IT systems used by the government and private sector.

The operations centre would have links to the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), a large eavesdropping intelligence agency that provides advice to the public and private sector on combating hackers and computer espionage.

The steps had been developed in close cooperation with UK-based financial markets and institutions, he said.

“With over 50 billion pounds spent online in the UK every year and 90 percent of our high street purchases made using electronic transactions new technology is vital to our national prosperity,” a government briefing note said.

The government has been repeatedly embarrassed by losses of data, such as when tax authorities lost data on 25 million people exposing them to the risk of identity theft and fraud.

West said he was confident the new measures would help to prevent such breaches in future and would help protect a so-called Digital Britain initiative that aims to provide universal broadband access by 2012.

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