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Shell critic says oil major targeting his website

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2009-12-02 15:16:48 GMT (Reuters)

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By Tom Bergin

LONDON, Dec 2 (Reuters) - A prominent Internet critic of Royal Dutch Shell says the oil major has asked an anti-cyber fraud agency to target his site, which Shell admits provides better information on the group than its own internal communications.

John Donovan, who runs the Royaldutchshell.plc website, where disaffected Shell employees post company news and gossip, said the move suggests Shell has adopted more aggressive tactics in its long battle to shut him down.

"They are very worried about the leaks," Donovan told Reuters in a telephone interview.

"They are trying to track down the people who are leaking information to us," he added.

The allegations are based on emails Donovan said Shell released to him following a request under data protection law rights. Donovan shared these, and a letter on Shell headed paper responding to Donovan's request, with Reuters.

Shell did not comment on the veracity of the communication or any of Donovan's allegations, despite several emails and phone calls requesting it.

However, Gavin White, from Shell's legal department, whose name appeared on the cover letter to Donovan, confirmed that Donovan made a request for information.

"The request is not a matter for public discussion or comment," White said.

One email between Shell employees dated June 2009, said an individual whose name is blanked out but apparently also a Shell employee, met with "NCFTA" to discuss the website.

The email adds that resources had been assigned to NCFTA "that are RDS (presumably Royal Dutch Shell) focused" and that "There will be no attempt to do anything visible to Donovan".

Donovan believes NCFTA refers to the National Cyber Forensics and Training Alliance, a Pittsburgh-based organisation, whose website says it is supported by Fortune 500 companies and that its purpose is to help tackle cyber fraud.

A Google search for NCFTA yields the Pittsburgh organisation as the top result.

National Cyber Forensics and Training Alliance did not respond to emails or telephone calls.

Another email, dated March 2007 said Shell was monitoring emails from Shell servers globally to Donovan and internal traffic to their website. The email noted this information was "not for publication".

LONG-RUNNING BATTLE

Donovan, 62, and his father, Alfred, 92, have been vocal Internet critics of Europe's largest oil company by market value since the 1990s after a business dispute with Shell, which was a client of their sales promotion business.

That case, and two libel actions against Shell, were settled out of court a decade ago but the internet battle has continued.

Shell insiders use the Donovans' site to leak company secrets including, in the past 12 months alone, a planned restructuring of the group under new Chief Executive Peter Vosser and a big hole in Shell's pension fund.

The website, which Donovan said receives 2 million hits a month, has also featured attacks on Shell's safety and environmental record.

Most of the vast reams of information and news reports on the site is unflattering about Shell, whose market capitalisation tops \$182 billion.

Another email seen by Reuters, apparently from a Shell communications representative to U.S. news network Fox News said: "royaldutchshell.plc.com is an excellent source of group news and comment and I recommend it far above what our own group internal comms puts out".

After failing to have the Donovans' ownership of the royaldutchshellplc.com domain name removed in a legal challenge in 2005, Shell appeared to have taken the approach of ignoring the site for fear of raising its profile any higher.

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However, Donovan fears the company had simply adopted different tactics.

In March 2008, the website faced a cyber "assault".

"Someone was sending so many requests it kept on crashing it," Donovan said.

Donovan said he complained to Shell about the problem and that the same day, the problem stopped.

Shell declined to comment about this incident but in a letter from Shell to Donovan, posted on his site, Shell denied any responsibility.

In recent years, heavy-handed corporate attempts to stem leaks have caused public and political outrage.

Personal computer maker Hewlett-Packard became the target of lawsuits, a U.S. Congressional inquiry and police investigation due to its efforts to stem leaks in 2005 and 2006.

HP hired investigators, who impersonated reporters, board members and employees to obtain private phone records.

Deutsche Telekom is the subject of a long-running investigation in Germany after allegations it spied on directors and journalists to find out who was leaking information to the press in 2005.

Prosecutors have launched a criminal investigation into corporate spying at Deutsche Bank, which said in July that a detective agency it had hired had spied on people the bank deemed a threat.

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(Editing by Sitaraman Shankar)

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