



Impact of Internet Shutdowns

For Prelims: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), #KEEPITON coalition, World Bank

For Mains: Internet Shutdowns and their implications

Why in News?

Recently, a report published by the [Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights \(OHCHR\)](#) named **Internet shutdowns: Trends, causes, legal implications and impacts on a range of human rights**, stated that shutting down the internet affects people's safety & well-being, hampers information flow and harms the economy.

What is an Internet Shutdown?

▪ About:

- Internet shutdowns are **measures taken by a government or by any entity on behalf of a government, to intentionally disrupt access to and the use of information and communications systems online.**
- Shutdowns often include complete blocks of Internet connectivity or accessibility of the affected services. However, **governments increasingly resort to throttling bandwidth or limiting mobile service to 2G**, which, while nominally maintaining access, renders it extremely difficult to make meaningful use of the Internet.
- Governments across the world have resorted to shutting down the internet citing a range of reasons.
- Further makes it difficult to share and watch videos, live broadcasts, and other journalistic work, often ordered during civil society movements, security measures as well as electoral proceedings, and severely restricts human rights monitoring and reporting.

▪ Related International Frameworks:

- Internet shutdowns deeply affect many human rights, they most immediately affect freedom of expression and access to information – one of the foundations of free and democratic societies and an indispensable condition for the full development of the person.
- It is a touchstone for all other rights guaranteed in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and other **human rights** instruments (i.e. [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#)).
- The [Sustainable Development Goals](#) reinforce States' human rights obligations to work towards universally available and accessible Internet, free from unjustified restrictions.
- Founded to facilitate international connectivity in communications networks, the [International Telecommunication Union \(ITU\)](#) works on the adoption of standards that ensure that networks and technologies interconnect, and strives to improve access to the Internet

What are the Key Findings?

- **Global Scenario:**
 - The **first major internet shutdown** that captured global attention took place in **Egypt in 2011** and was accompanied by hundreds of arrests and killings.
 - The **#KeptOn coalition**, which **monitors internet shutdown episodes** across the world, documented **931 shutdowns in 74 countries from 2016-2021**.
 - As many as 12 countries implemented more than 10 shutdowns during that period. Globally, all regions have experienced multiple shutdowns, but the **majority reported occurred in Asia and Africa**.
 - As many as 132 of the shutdowns recorded by civil society groups were officially **justified by the need to control the spread of hate speech, disinformation, or other forms of content deemed illegal or harmful**.
- **Indian Scenario:**
 - India blocked or disrupted internet connections **106 times and at least 85 of India's internet shutdown episodes were in Jammu & Kashmir**.
 - Almost half of all shutdowns recorded by civil society groups from 2016-2021 were carried out in the context of **protests and political crises**, with 225 shutdowns recorded during public demonstrations relating to a vast range of social, political or economic grievances.
- **Shutdowns During Elections:**
 - It eliminates access to digital tools that are critical for campaigning, promoting public discussion, conducting voting and overseeing the electoral processes.
 - In 2019 alone, 14 African countries disrupted access to the internet during electoral periods.
 - Disruptions severely inhibit the work of journalists and the media in general, a key element of fair elections. **In Uganda**, shutdowns undermined media coverage of the elections in 2021, amid reports of violent repressive measures.
 - Shutdowns following protests during electoral periods were also reported in countries such as Belarus and Niger.
- **Impact of Internet Shutdown:**
 - **On Economic Activities:** It causes major economic costs for all sectors, disrupting financial transactions, commerce and industry.
 - The **World Bank** recently calculated that Internet shutdowns in Myanmar alone had cost nearly USD 2.8 billion from February-December 2021, reversing economic progress made over the previous decade.
 - **On Education:** It undermines learning outcomes and interferes with education planning and communication among teachers, school administrators and families.
 - **On Access to Health and Humanitarian Assistance:**
 - Studies have shown the significant impacts of shutdowns on health systems, including on mobilizing urgent medical care, disrupting the delivery of essential medicines and maintenance of equipment, limiting the exchange of health information between medical personnel and disrupting essential mental health assistance.
 - Internet shutdowns have a profound effect on the ability of humanitarian actors to provide assistance. Supply chains and the flow of information critical to the delivery of goods and services can be disrupted.
 - In Myanmar, Internet shutdowns reportedly put local aid organizations at peril, including because they prevented them from seeking and receiving funds.

Supreme Court of India Guidelines for Internet Shutdown

- As held by the Hon'ble Supreme Court in *Anuradha Bhasin v. UOI (2020)*, the shutdowns do not violate Article 19 of the Indian Constitution. It acts as a reasonable restriction and it should only be enacted if there is a genuine threat to public safety or national security. Certain balancing tests should be carried out and only if extremely necessary, the government should proceed with this extremely restrictive step.

Way Forward

- The report noted that one of the greatest obstacles to reversing the trend towards a greater frequency of Internet shutdowns is the **limited visibility of those measures and their impacts.**
- The report urged states to refrain from imposing shutdowns, to maximize Internet access and remove the multiple obstacles standing in the way of communication.
- It also called upon companies to **speedily share information on disruptions and ensure that they take all possible lawful measures to prevent shutdowns they have been asked to implement.**
- Shutdowns run directly counter to efforts to close the digital divide, and the promise of the accelerated economic and social development that closing the divide would bring, threatening the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals.

[Source: DTE](#)

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