



Yearender: 2013 sees loss of U.S. credibility amid spy scandals

by Matthew Rusling

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 26 (Xinhua) -- While the United States has always touted itself as a "beacon of democracy," critics this year have blasted Washington for its massive domestic and global spying program, accusing President Barack Obama's administration of hypocrisy.

The story began earlier this year, when it was revealed that the U.S. Justice Department was snooping on the Associated Press (AP), obtaining months worth of phone records for 20 separate phone lines in what AP CEO Gary Pruitt called "unconstitutional."

Soon after, more news was uncovered, including reports that the government collected phone records of Fox News reporter James Rosen and seized his personal emails.

Then came the biggest story of all, when Edward Snowden revealed a massive National Security Agency (NSA) program that allows analysts to sift through databases that contain emails from millions of Americans, according to documents made public by Snowden. Snowden also uncovered a secret program whereby the government has collected millions of phone records of Verizon customers.

The news grabbed headlines worldwide, and was followed by reports of the U.S. spying on its allies, including accusations of tapping the private cell phone of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, which the White House denied.

Later it was discovered the United States was spying on countries including Indonesia and Israel, and that Australia allowed the NSA to operate from its embassies in Thailand, China, East Timor and Vietnam.

Japanese media reported in October that the NSA in 2011 asked Tokyo to assist in gaining access to fiber optic cables that relayed communications from China.

LOSS OF U.S. CREDIBILITY

"The National Security Agency's profligate spying has certainly hurt U.S. credibility, in a number of ways," Jim Harper, director of Information Policy Studies at the Cato Institute, told Xinhua.

While spying has always occurred between nations, the United States has been berated for spying on some of its closest allies.

"Spying on the personal communications of allied leaders...conveys a suspicious attitude toward world leaders who the U.S. publicly treats as friends. While its leaders have touted threats to cyber security from abroad, the NSA has been one of the most active attackers of computer systems around the world," Harper said.

He added that the NSA's domestic spying programs have undermined U.S. claims of respect for individual rights.

"If it is to be a beacon of freedom, the United States government should actually conduct itself as a country that respects rights and that obeys its own laws," he said.

Harper said the NSA's spying operations have undermined trust in U.S. technology companies. That will cost U.S. businesses billions of U.S. dollars and shrink global trade in high-tech services that would have benefited people worldwide, he said.

The Information Technology & Innovation Foundation estimated that U.S. companies could lose up to 35 billion dollars due to U.S. spying activities, on doubts that companies can protect the security of information on their systems, reported Bloomberg.

Still, others said it remains unknown whether there will be any real consequences. While many countries have upbraided Washington for its spying activities, the fact is that most countries want to do business with the world's largest economy and want access to its markets. Countries also still want and need to cooperate on security issues with the U.S. military, some experts said.

"I think it's damaged the U.S. in terms of world opinion, but I don't know that it's damaged it with respect to doing business and defense (cooperation) with other nations," Republican Strategist Ford O'Connell told Xinhua.

POLITICAL FALLOUT

Meanwhile, the United States continues to deal with the political fallout from its global spy program.

Israeli officials Sunday called for an end to U.S. spying on Israel, Washington's closest Middle East ally, after it was revealed that the NSA gained access to emails from Israeli leadership.

The demands came on the heels of the release of documents that Snowden leaked and published last week by the media, which revealed that British intelligence worked alongside the NSA between 2008 and 2011 to gain access to email addresses of the offices of former Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak and former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

As for whether Obama knew U.S. intelligence agencies were monitoring U.S. allies, the NSA denied that the president had any knowledge.

However, Foreign Policy magazine argued in a recent article that it would be impossible for Obama not to know about the NSA's snooping on allies, although he might not have been aware of the details.