

Israel launches commission to probe Pegasus spyware

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A leaked list of names indicated that the NSO company's Pegasus spyware had been used by governments to surveil the phones of heads of states, activists and journalists [File: Mario Goldman/AFP]

Tel Aviv, July 22 (RHC)-- Israel has established a commission to review allegations that NSO Group's controversial Pegasus phone surveillance software was misused amid a hacking scandal that has roiled governments globally.

The announcement by the head of the Israeli parliament's Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee came amid revelations that the Israeli firm's spyware appears to have been used by governments in the surveillance of heads of states, opposition figures, activists and journalists, whose names were among some 50,000 potential targets on a list leaked to rights group Amnesty International and Paris-based Forbidden Stories.

The revelations sparked calls for accountability and increased controls on the international sale of spyware technology. Pegasus can hack into mobile phones without a user knowing, enabling clients to read every message, track a user's location and tap into the phone's camera and microphone.

Israeli legislator Ram Ben Barak, the former deputy head of Israel's Mossad spy agency, told Army Radio, "The defence establishment appointed a review commission made up of a number of groups" to probe the allegations.

"When they finish their review, we'll demand to see the results and assess whether we need to make corrections," he said. NSO, for its part, has said the leak is "not a list of targets or potential targets of Pegasus".

On Thursday, its chief executive Shalev Hulio told Army Radio that he would "be very pleased if there were an investigation, so that we'd be able to clear our name" while claiming the allegations were part of a larger effort "to smear all the Israeli cyber industry." NSO has said it exports to 45 countries with approval from the Israeli government.

Hulio said the company could not disclose the details of its contracts due to "issues of confidentiality," but said he would offer full transparency to any government seeking more details. "Let any state entity come along – any official from any state – and I'll be prepared to open everything up to them, for them to enter, to dig around from top to bottom," he said.

Meanwhile, Ben Barak said Israel's priority was "to review this whole matter of giving licences." He credited Pegasus with exposing many "terror cells", but added: "If it was misused or sold to irresponsible bodies, this is something we need to check."

Paris-based Reporters Without Borders on Wednesday called for a moratorium on cyber-surveillance software.

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