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Up to 1,500 firms could be affected by Friday's cyberattack: CEO

Between 800 and 1,500 businesses around the world have been affected by a ransomware attack centered on US information technology firm Kaseya, its chief executive said.

Fred Voccola, the Florida-based company's CEO, said in an interview on Monday that it was hard to estimate the precise impact of Friday's attack because those hit were mainly customers of Kaseya's customers.

Kaseya is a company that provides software tools to IT outsourcing shops: companies that typically handle back-office work for companies too small or modestly resourced to have their own tech departments.

One of those tools was subverted on Friday, allowing the hackers to paralyze hundreds of businesses on all five continents. Although most of those affected have been small concerns – like dentists' offices or accountants – the disruption has been felt more keenly in Sweden, where hundreds of supermarkets had to close because their cash registers were inoperative, or New Zealand, where schools and kindergartens were knocked offline.

The hackers who claimed responsibility for the breach have demanded $70m to restore all the affected businesses' data, although they have indicated a willingness to temper their demands in private conversations with a cybersecurity expert and with Reuters.

"We are always ready to negotiate," a representative of the hackers told Reuters earlier Monday.

The representative, who spoke via a chat interface on the hackers' website, did not provide their name.

Voccola refused to say whether he was ready to take the hackers up on the offer.

"I can't comment 'yes', 'no', or 'maybe'," he said when asked whether his company would talk to or pay the hackers. "No comment on anything to do with negotiating with terrorists in any way."

The topic of ransom payments has become increasingly fraught as ransomware attacks become increasingly disruptive – and lucrative.

Voccola said he had spoken to officials at the White House, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Department of Homeland Security about the breach but declined to say what they had told him about paying or negotiating.

On Sunday the White House said it was checking to see whether there was any "national risk" posed by the ransomware outbreak but Voccola said that – so far – he was not aware of any nationally important organizations being hit.

Aljazeera

Pfizer, Moderna vaccines could protect against COVID-19 for years: Study

Those who have been vaccinated with Pfizer and Moderna's COVID-19 vaccines could be protected against the virus for years, a new study found.

In research conducted by scientists from the Washington University School of Medicine in the United States, it was found that the two vaccines created a constant immune reaction to the virus in the body that protects itself against COVID-19, online medical news agency Health reported on Tuesday. The research indicated that booster shots might not be needed to protect against the existing variants, unless new strains emerge and are stronger than the two messenger RNA-based vaccines.

The researchers looked at the cells in the lymph nodes of the individuals who were vaccinated and took part in the study. They determined that the cells were consistently practicing how to defend the body against the virus after the first shot was given to them.

A specialized structure referred to as the germinal center forms in the lymph nodes after an infection or vaccination. This means that the more these cells practice creating an adequate immune response, the more likely they will be able to protect the individual against variants of the virus, should they emerge.

According to the immunologist Dr. Ellebedy and his team, the germinal center was still highly active in all fourteen of the study's participants 15 weeks after receiving the first dose of the vaccine, adding that the number of memory cells that recognized the virus did not decline.

Read more: Is it safe to mix-and-match COVID-19 vaccines?

"It's a good sign for how durable our immunity is from this vaccine," Dr. Ali Ellebedy who is based at the Washington University in St. Louis told the New York Times. "The fact that the reactions continued for almost four months after vaccination - that's a very, very good sign."

Dr. Ellebedy added that the study did not consider the Janssen COVID-19 jab by Johnson and Johnson, but said that he expected the immune response to the virus to be less durable than mRNA vaccines.

The researchers of the study, including Dr. Ellebedy, reported that the immune cells that recognized the virus in individuals who had previously fought off COVID-19 remained in the bone marrow for at least eight months after the infection. This suggested that immunity might last years in people who were previously infected and later vaccinated, The New York Times reported.

The results of the study suggested that a vast majority of people who are vaccinated with Pfizer or Moderna would be protected in the long run against existing variants. However, older adults or people with weaker immune systems will need booster shots.

The exact length of the protection provided by mRNA vaccines against the virus has not been determined.

Alarabiya

Israel's new government fails to extend controversial citizenship law

Israel's parliament has failed to pass an extension to a controversial law barring Palestinians from the occupied West Bank or Gaza who marry Israelis from being granted citizenship rights.

After a debate that lasted through the night, the vote was tied 59 to 59.

It was the first major political test for Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's coalition since it took office in June.

The legislation, which critics say is discriminatory, is now due to expire at the end of Tuesday.

Mr Bennet set it up the vote on the citizenship law as a vote of confidence in his new ideologically-diverse government, which includes left-wing, centrist, right-wing and Arab parties.

He had hoped a compromise tabled on Monday would be accepted.

But in a tense, late-night session, 59 members of parliament voted in favour and 59 against, with two abstentions from the United Arab List, a party representing Israel's Arab minority that sits in the coalition.

Right-wing opposition politicians who had formerly supported the legislation, led by former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, voted against the law to embarrass Mr Bennett, who leads the right-wing nationalist Yamina party.

The Citizenship and Entry Law was originally passed in 2003, at the time of the second Palestinian intifada, or uprising, when Palestinian militants were carrying out attacks inside Israel.

The authorities have renewed it every year since, citing security reasons.

BBC

Covid-19: New rules for schools in England to be set out

England's schools will find out later how the government plans to relax rules that have led to large numbers of pupils being sent home if a single child has a positive Covid test.

Last week the "bubble" system saw more than 375,000 children sent home.

It has meant missed days of lessons for thousands of pupils and frustration for parents juggling work and childcare.

The announcement will come amid a backlash to government plans to ditch rules on the wearing of face masks.

Labour, trade unions and some scientists have said now is not the time to change the rules on masks as case numbers continue to rise rapidly, driven by the new, more infectious Delta variant.

Meanwhile, Health Secretary Sajid Javid said he would make an announcement to MPs later on self-isolation changes for those who have had been fully vaccinated.

He told BBC Breakfast: "We will have a more proportionate system of test, trace and isolate and it is absolutely right that those that have been double jabbed, that we can take a different approach than the one we can take today."

He said the UK was now entering "uncharted territory" as it moved to lift legal restrictions aimed at controlling the spread of coronavirus but he said the decision had to be made because of the "other health problems" millions of people were facing.

At a Downing Street press conference on Monday, Boris Johnson confirmed he intended to scrap the laws on mask wearing and social distancing in the final stage of England's Covid lockdown roadmap on 19 July.

The date will be confirmed on 12 July after a review of the latest data.

Other changes announced on Monday include the planned reopening of nightclubs for the first time since the pandemic began, an end to all legal limits on the number of people who can attend events and the scrapping of guidance to work from home.

On schools, Mr Johnson said Education Secretary Gavin Williamson would outline a move away from sending "bubbles" home and from contact isolation for pupils so as to "greatly reduce the impact on schools of Covid outbreaks".

"And obviously the way forward is with testing rather than by sending the bubbles home," he added.

There has been widespread concern that thousands of pupils are missing school unnecessarily.

Last month the number sent home from school for Covid-related reasons quadrupled - but only about 4% were confirmed cases, with most pupils sent home because of a potential contact at school.

Mr Williamson is expected to say the changes will come into effect on 19 July, alongside the lifting of other Covid restrictions.

The PM's message on Monday was it was "now or never" to lift the restrictions.

He said the success of the vaccine rollout had weakened the link between cases and deaths.

media captionPM Boris Johnson: "If we can't reopen in next few weeks, when will we?"

"If we don't go ahead now, when we've clearly done so much with the vaccination programme to break the link... when would we go ahead?"

He added: "We run the risk of either opening up at a very difficult time when the virus has an edge, has an advantage, in the cold months, or again putting everything off to next year."

On Monday, a further 27,334 cases were reported across the UK - and another nine deaths within 28 days of a positive test.

In a sombre warning, Mr Johnson warned cases were predicted to rise to 50,000 a day later this month - and more people would die.

Prof Neil Ferguson, from Imperial College, whose modelling led to the first nationwide restrictions, said there was the potential for the UK to have a very large numbers of cases - 150,000 to 200,000 a day - which could "still cause some pressure to the health system".

However he told BBC Radio 4's Today programme that although it was a "slight gamble" he thought it was "justifiable", adding "I'm reasonably optimistic".

BBC

The US and India have a lot of work to do on digital cooperation

New Delhi, India — It is an unfolding drama worthy of a Bollywood film.

In February, Twitter took down hundreds of accounts that were posting on the continuing farmer protests against three agriculture laws passed in India last year, only to restore some of them after a massive public backlash.

Twitter said the accounts were taken down to comply with orders from the Indian government. But that was just the start of this year's tensions between a United States social media giant and the Indian government.

Authorities in New Delhi have passed new rules that require, among other things, that social media platforms disclose the identities of people who post content – eliciting howls of protests from tech firms and free-speech activists.

Indian police visited Twitter's offices in May after it failed to comply with a request to remove a "manipulated media" label it had slapped on tweets from politicians belonging to the country's governing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). And in late June, Twitter's India head was slapped with a police complaint about a map of India that showed the politically sensitive region of Kashmir as a separate country, while a far-right group filed a police complaint on June 30 alleging Twitter promoted child pornography on its platform.

It's not just Twitter that is in the crosshairs. Facebook and Amazon have also found themselves butting heads with the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi – clashes that underscore how a lack of formal cooperation can see relations between a US tech giant and the Indian government utterly derail – to the possible detriment of both.

India boasts 1.1 billion mobile phone subscribers and some 757 million internet users, most of whom go online via their handsets, according to the latest government data. That potential customer pool is all the more alluring given India's growing digital advertising market which is expected to increase from $2.2bn last year to $3.2bn by end of 2022, according to digital marketing firm Dentsu India.

The Indian digital ecosystem, while still at an early stage, "is one of the most important markets out there," said Anand Raghuraman, vice president at the Asia Group, a strategic advisory firm. "Leading tech companies recognise this and that's why they continue to invest in India in a big way and we don't see that changing in the near term," he said.

With an opportunity that vast, it is easy to see how social media giants like Twitter and Facebook to streaming platforms Amazon and Netflix are willing to dance to at least some of New Delhi's digital diktats. But global tech firms also know from experience that India's tech policy landscape is prone to frequent shifts and shaped by complex regulatory structures, warned Raghuraman.

"The real question is what will rise faster – India's digital economy or the policy barriers gating access to it," he said, adding that both countries need to have a "digital dialogue" and "an honest conversation" to resolve issues and take their relationship to the next level.

India also stands to gain from more cordial relations with US tech behemoths, said Rahguraman, by helping New Delhi check neighbouring China's influence at home and abroad, including in the digital domain. It also anchors US tech companies and their deep pockets to India, helping to create jobs and bolster innovation.

Building mutual trust at a regulatory level between the US and India is crucial for US firms to claim a slice of India's digital market without having to worry about being undercut by domestic Indian players stepping in to provide copycat services.

It is hoped that renewed enthusiasm for multilateral agreements under the administration of US President Joe Biden could yet open the door for deeper digital cooperation between Washington and New Delhi as there are a lot of barriers to smoother relations.

Aljazeera