The web is a great tool for sharing ideas and freedom of expression. However, efforts to try and control the Internet are growing. Internet repression is reported in countries like China, Vietnam, Tunisia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Syria. People are persecuted and imprisoned simply for criticizing their government, calling for democracy and greater press freedom, or exposing human rights abuses, online.

But Internet repression is not just about governments. IT companies have helped build the systems that enable surveillance and censorship to take place. Yahoo! has supplied email users' private data to the Chinese authorities, helping to facilitate cases of wrongful imprisonment. Microsoft and Google have both complied with government demands to actively censor Chinese users of their services.

Freedom of expression is a fundamental human right. It is one of the most precious of all rights. We should fight to protect it.

Next week a U.N.-sponsored Internet Governance Forum (IGF) will be held in Athens. An Amnesty International delegation will ensure that human rights remain central to the conference proceedings.

The IGF is being held as China ponders requiring bloggers to use their real names to register blogs.

"A real name system for China's blogs would be another link in the chain of Internet repression," said Erica Razook, legal fellow in the Business and Human Rights Program of Amnesty International USA. "The Chinese government, with the collusion of U.S. companies, is already stifling dissent online. This development would make the situation far worse.

"Ongoing Internet censorship in China is one very clear example of the extent to which human rights are being attacked online around the world. The web should be a tool for expression, not repression."

Razook will be part of the Amnesty International delegation to the IGF.

In its work combating Internet censorship, Amnesty International has documented the failures of governments to respect and protect the rights to freedom of information, expression, association and privacy, and has detailed the collaboration of businesses in some of these violations.

As highlighted in Amnesty International's statement today: Yahoo has provided Chinese authorities with confidential information leading to the arrest of journalists. Microsoft has shut down a blog at Chinese government request. Google has launched a censored version of its international search engine in China.

Amnesty International noted the plight of three persons detained for defending human rights online. Chinese journalist Shi Tao e-mailed a U.S.-based Web site an internal government directive on media coverage of the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre. He remains imprisoned in China. Tunisian lawyer Mohammed Abbou is serving a three and a half year term largely for articles critical of the Tunisian authorities on the Internet. Vietnamese dissident Truong Quoc Huy has been arrested twice for participation in democracy and human rights chat rooms. His current whereabouts are unknown, and no charges have been made public.

Amnesty International considers these three human rights defenders, and many others, to be prisoners of conscience.

The irrepressible.info campaign, launched in May and centered on the Web site http://irrepressible.info
combats global Internet repression. Activists can undermine Internet censorship by copying a snippet of code to create a badge that cycles through pieces of censored information on their own Web pages. From
http://irrepressible.info
users can now directly access a database of censored information, and an application programming interface allows programmers to create custom applications utilizing that database.

An irrepressible.info pledge affirming the right to freedom of information online has so far

attracted almost 50,000 supporters. Amnesty International will formally present these signatures at the IGF.

Please visit the following web sites:

http://irrepressible.info

http://www.amnestyusa.org/