

5. 'WhatsApp did not inform Govt. of System Breach'

Prelims: Cyber Space Challenges

Mains: GS-III Internal Security - Cyber Security

Why in News?

- ▶▶ WhatsApp has stated that some Indian users of WhatsApp came under surveillance using an Israeli spyware.

Highlights:

- ▶▶ WhatsApp in October 2019 sued the NSO Group, an Israeli surveillance firm and developers of Pegasus, which is reportedly behind the technology that helped unnamed entities hack into roughly 1,400 devices across at least 20 countries, including India, Bahrain, Mexico and UAE. Indian users were among those impacted by the spyware.
- ▶▶ The NSO Group is an Israeli technology firm, which claims on its website that its products are used “exclusively” by government intelligence and law enforcement agencies “to fight crime and terror”.

Concerns:

- ▶▶ WhatsApp has over 1.5 billion users globally, of which India alone accounts for about 400 million.
- ▶▶ The vulnerability of the users to such spying is of grave concern with regard to breach of their privacy.
- ▶▶ Government has stated that WhatsApp failed to inform the government of a breach of its system despite being legally bound to do so under Section 70(B) of the IT Act. They are legally bound to inform (computer emergency response team) CERT or any other relevant government agencies about the details of such attacks on Indian citizens.
- ▶▶ Despite WhatsApp arguing that they had given information to CERT-IN, the government has stated that it was a communication in pure technical jargon without any mention of Pegasus or the extent of breach.
- ▶▶ Thus the information shared was only about a technical vulnerability but nothing on the fact that privacy of Indian users had been compromised. Lack of clarity on this issue shows the loopholes in the current processes.
- ▶▶ The government has been blamed for trying to use the spyware to target specific people. However the government has stated that government agencies operate strictly as per provisions of law and a well-established protocol for interception.

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- Government has claimed that reports of breach of privacy of Indian citizens on WhatsApp were attempts to malign the government and are completely misleading. The episode has taken up a political tone.

