Internet shutdowns in times of conflict are on the rise, and it's costing the world billions

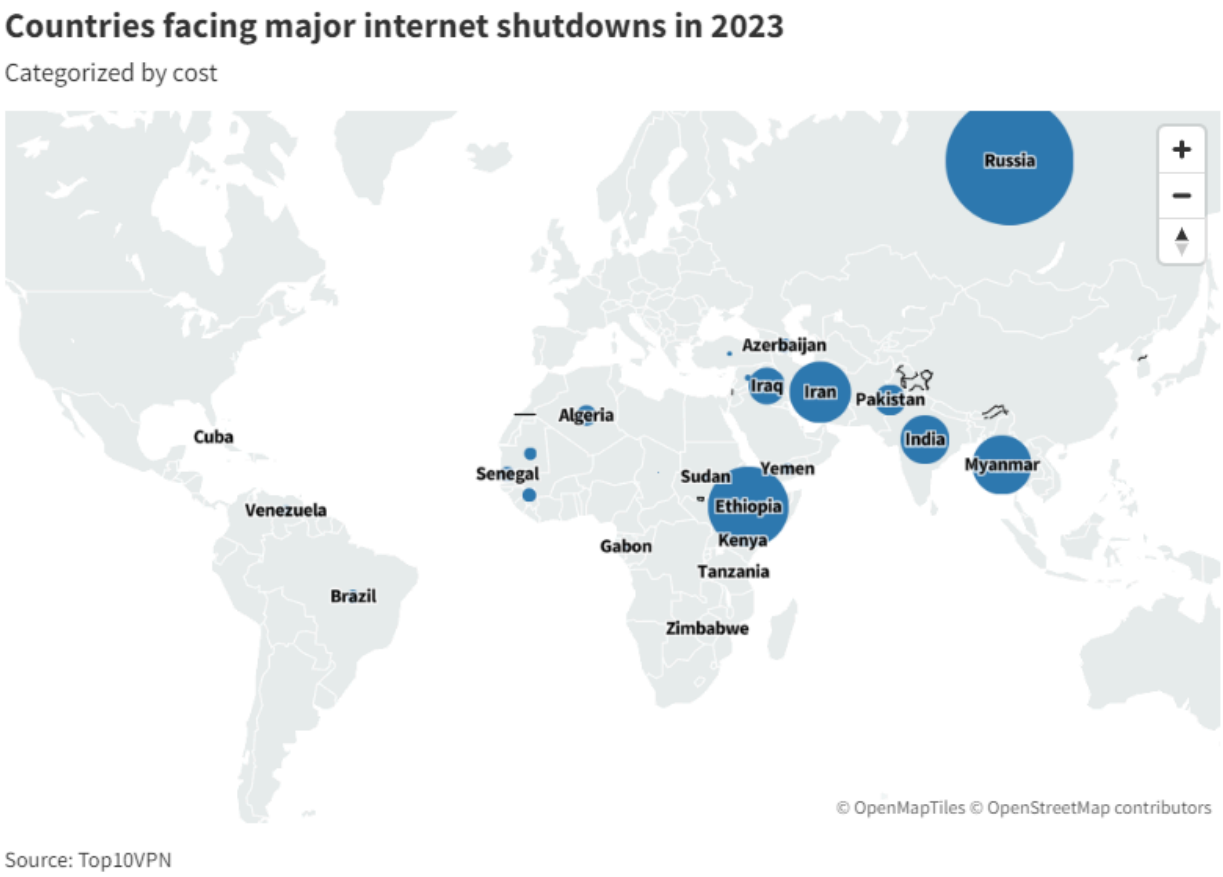
Human rights violations undocumented, communication lost, shutdowns in conflict a concerning trend say experts

- Hemani Vipul

Countries around the globe are increasingly weaponising the internet, especially in times of conflict according to experts.

Countries are resorting to shutting down the internet in times of conflict and it is costing the world. Internet shutdowns have been on the rise over the past few years, data shows. In 2023, 196 major self-imposed internet outages were reported in 25 countries with an economic cost of a whopping $9.01 billion, as per a report from Top10VPN. Of this, conflicts accounted for $5.06 billion of the total cost.

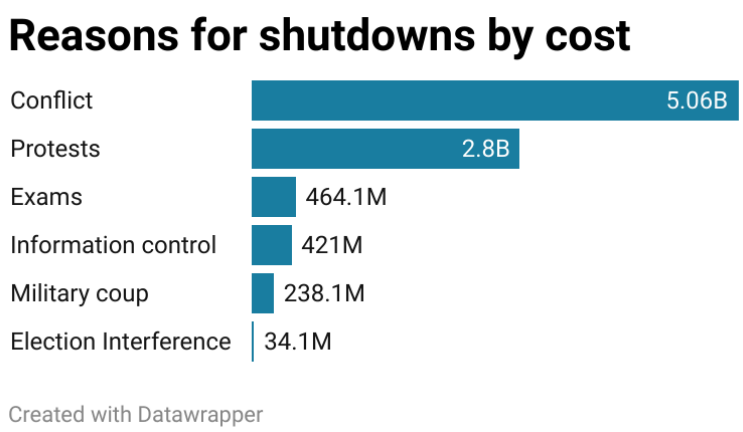
“It's the most costly (reason) that we that we recorded last year. And the major reason for that was the social media restrictions in Russia, which are attributed directly to the conflict with Ukraine,” explained Samuel Woodhams, Digital Rights Lead at Top10VPN.



Map link: https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/16588833/

“On a more general level, we see conflict as a very common reason for Internet shutdowns globally and have seen that over the past five years. One of the main reasons for that is to stifle any criticism of ongoing conflicts, that's definitely the case for Russia. It’s also to really be able to control the narrative, which is, which is particularly important in times of conflict,” he added.

Of the total 79,238 hours of government internet disruptions reported, internet blackouts accounted for 25,535 hours of shutdown while social media blocks accounted for 53,703 hours. Conflict accounted for 18 internet shutdowns in 2023, lasting 20,462 hours.



Reasons for shutdowns https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/JU00P/1/

Along with self-imposed shutdowns, another concerning trend is the targeting of internet infrastructure in conflicts.

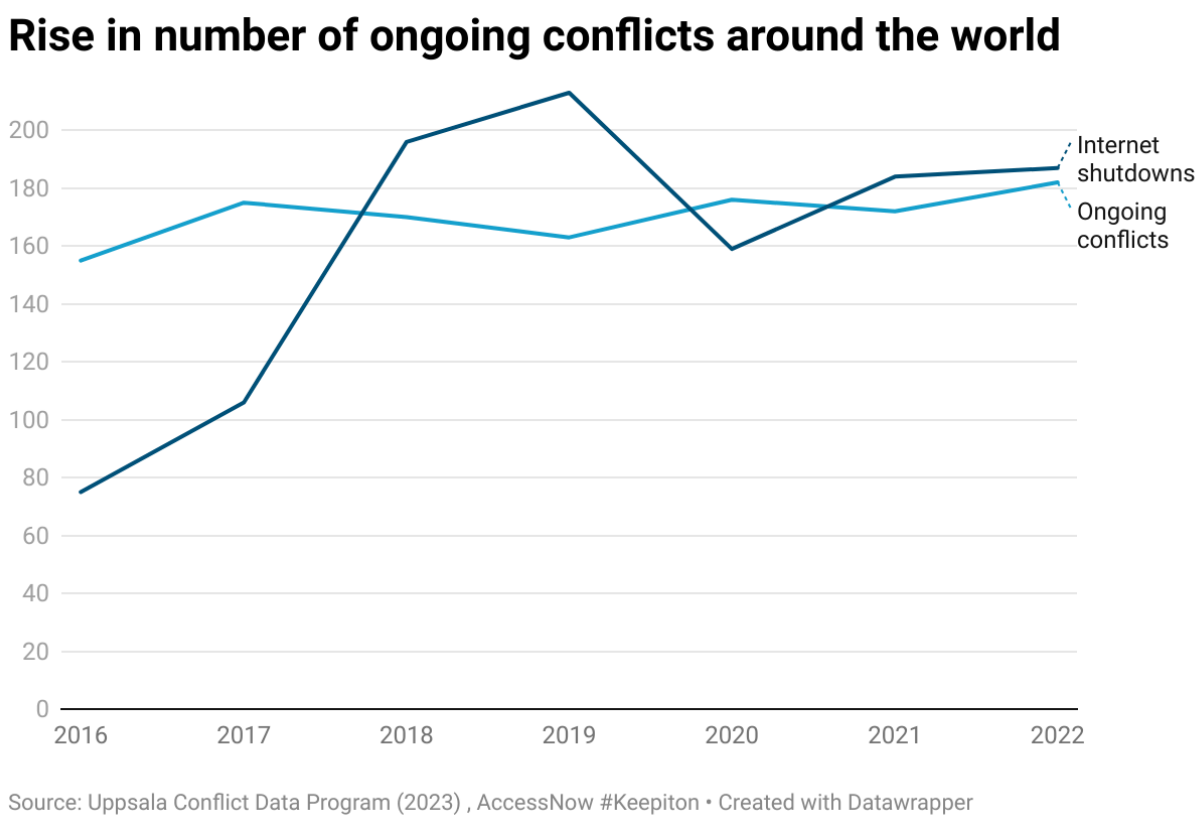
“Running in tandem with that (self-imposed shutdowns) is the trend of, during conflict, governments seeking to disrupt the telecommunications sector of the adversaries,” explained Woodhams.

“When you look at the timing of shutdowns during conflicts or just the fact that is being weaponized during the conflict, I think it's always a matter of control by whoever is important that disruption, in the sense that whenever there's a conflict between two parties or more, yeah, the internet infrastructure becomes a target aside other civilian infrastructure that gets targeted, but I mean, the internet increasingly has become like a go through, whenever conflict breaks out,” explained Felicia Fauzia Anthonio, Campaign Manager for #KeepItOn, a global campaign against internet shutdowns at AccesNow.

For instance, such incidents are reported in Gaza.

“Currently in Gaza, we've seen Israel also targeting internet infrastructure. And we are currently experiencing over these past few weeks, one of the longest shutdowns that has happened since the conflict started in October,” added Anthonio.

As per a report from AccessNow, as of October 31, 2023, 15 of the 19 internet service providers operating in Gaza “were facing a complete shutdown of their mobile and broadband services, and the remaining four were each experiencing significant but varying levels of disruption, impacting millions of people.”



Link to chart: https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/du3YY/1/

Apart from an economic issue, the rise in internet shutdowns, especially during conflicts is becoming a human rights issue. There have been rising concerns over this rise in shutdowns, self-imposed or otherwise in times of conflict. Such shutdowns can not only block access to communication facilities but also hinder human rights violations from coming to light. Experts have thus equated internet shutdowns during conflicts to be a human rights issue.

“In conflict zones, for instance, Myanmar has seen one of the longest internet shutdowns in the world. During shutdowns like this, we see that they cannot document human rights atrocities properly. So that is an impact,” said Gayatri Malhotra-Associate litigation counsel, Internet Freedom Foundation.

According to a Top10VPN report, Myanmar “inflicted the worst economic damage on itself via internet outages ($2.8 billion)” in 2021. In 2023, the country recorded an internet blackout of 10,008 hours and a social media shutdown of 8,760 hours, as per the report.

“In times of conflict, we need to be wary that international norms are being disregarded frequently, and not just about the internet during times of conflict,” said Woodhams.

“These are worrying trends that are spreading across the globe. And the danger of it is also that whenever these shutdowns happen in times of conflict, it also makes it extremely difficult for

human rights abuses to be documented. Journalists are restricted, even physically, they cannot access the war in all the conflict areas. And then if the internet is disrupted, then it makes it extremely difficult for them to be able to access information. It’s becoming really concerning,” added Anthonio.

Citing the example of Gaza, she further added, “If you followed the disruptions in Gaza, several humanitarian aid organizations and relief services have condemned the shutdown. And also the fact that it has directly impacted their delivery of humanitarian aid to be affected. Communities are victims of this conflict. I think it's just too dangerous for it to become a normal thing.”