The NSA records “every single” phone call in a targeted country

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The National Security Agency (NSA) has developed and deployed a system capable of recording “100 percent” of the telephone calls made by residents of a targeted foreign country, according to documents provided by NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden to the *Washington Post* and published on Tuesday.

At the request of US officials, the *Post* has not revealed which country is being subject to the program, or what other countries the NSA is seeking to target. The newspaper reported that “With up to 30 days of recorded conversations in hand, the NSA can pull an instant history of the subject’s movements, associates and plans.” The *Post* reported that other intelligence agencies also have access to the program.

The revelation refutes as a blatant lie the claim by Barack Obama that “people around the world, regardless of their nationality, should know that the United States is not spying on ordinary people who don’t threaten our national security.”

The collection of all the telephone calls made in any country would inevitably involve the recording of vast amounts of telephone conversations involving Americans who either called the country’s residents or received calls from them.

The *Post* noted that “Present and former U.S. officials, speaking on the condition of anonymity to provide context for a classified program, acknowledged that large numbers of conversations involving Americans would be gathered from the country” targeted by the program.

As a matter of policy, the NSA does not purge such phone calls, on the grounds that they are “acquired incidentally as a result of collection directed against appropriate foreign intelligence targets.”

The phone call recordings are being collected under a program called MYSTIC, which started in 2009. In 2011, the program added a tool, called RETRO, (short for “retrospective retrieval”) that allows the NSA to record “every single” telephone call in a targeted country and retrieve them for up to 30 days, according to a summary of the program obtained by the *Post*.

The *Post* reported that, while the RETRO program was developed in order to carry out spying on a single targeted country, such spying “may soon be extended to other countries, if it has not been already.” The *Post* notes that the secret intelligence budget leaked last year notes that there are at least five countries for which MYSTIC provides “comprehensive metadata access and content.”

The White House has sought to downplay allegations that it has been conducting a sweeping warrantless wiretapping dragnet by claiming that it only collects telephone “metadata,” that is, information about the call, and not the content itself. Obama claimed on January 17 that the “bulk collection of telephone records ... does not involve the content of phone calls.”

The latest revelation, however, makes clear that the US government is recording in dragnet fashion the telephone conversations of people in other countries, as well as the international telephone conversations of American citizens.

NSA spokeswoman Vanee Vines responded to a request for comment by the *Washington Post* by hinting that the exposure of the government’s systematic illegal spying bordered on treason. She said that the “continuous and selective reporting of specific techniques and tools used for legitimate U.S. foreign intelligence activities is highly detrimental to the national security of the United States and of our allies, and places at risk those we are sworn to protect.”

The collection, recording, and transcription of “100 percent” of a country’s telephone conversations is an

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enormous technological operation, involving unprecedented amounts of storage and data processing to handle large voice data files. In fact, the *Post* reported that, within the first year that the program was deployed, it "has long since reached the point where it was collecting and sending home far more than the bandwidth could handle."

The NSA has been scrambling to expand its data storage and processing capacities to accommodate the vast amounts of communications it is taking in, most notably with the construction of its enormous $2 billion Utah Data Center, which reportedly has the capacity to store the contents of every computer hard drive in the world.

Among the recommendations of the White House's Review Group on Intelligence and Communications Technologies, instituted in the wake of the Edward Snowden revelations, was that any calls or emails collected "incidentally…be purged upon detection." The *P ost* noted that the White House did not accept that recommendation, and the communications of millions of people acquired "incidentally" remain on NSA servers.

The revelations reaffirm the statements of Edward Snowden—which the US government continues to deny—that the NSA and other intelligence agencies operate a massive spying apparatus, inside which the telephone calls of millions of Americans are systematically recorded, transcribed, archived, and listened to in violation of the Fourth Amendment of the US Constitution.

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