

COLLEGE HACKERS SHINE LIGHT ON CYBERSECURITY

BOSTON: Students from MIT and Britain's University of Cambridge will spend the weekend hacking one another's computers, with the blessing of their national leaders. The two schools are competing in a hacking contest that U.S. President Barack Obama and British Prime Minister David Cameron announced last year among other joint cybersecurity projects between the two nations. The White House billed it as a showdown between the two prestigious schools, both known as heavyweights in the world of computer science.

But the colleges opted to make it a friendlier match. Instead of facing off against each other, the schools assigned their top hackers to six teams made up of students from both institutions. Teams will gather at MIT on Friday and then, for a frenzied 24 hours, try to hack into their opponents' computers and steal a trove of files.

"This isn't us versus them," said Howard Shrobe, a principal researcher at MIT's Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory, which is hosting the event. "It's the best of both schools working together." Along with bragging rights, winners will receive cash prizes of more than \$20,000. It's intended to be the first in a series of global cybersecurity competitions.

After a summit in Washington last year, Obama and Cameron jointly called for wider collaboration on cybersecurity. It was only weeks after the US government accused North Korea of hacking computers at Sony Pictures Entertainment Inc. The leaders also agreed to form a joint "cyber cell" among their national security agencies, among other measures.

Shortage of professionals

Major breaches like the Sony hack have underscored what experts say is a shortage of cybersecurity professionals. An industry group reported last year that 86 percent of its members believe there is a shortage of skilled workers. The contest at MIT aims to spark interest in the field and to promote cooperation among academics.

"It is essential for us to work together and compare notes," said Frank Stajano, leader of the Academic Centre of Excellence in Cyber Security Research at the University of Cambridge, which is sending 10 students to the competition. "If you're not at least as good as the bad guys, then you have no chance against them." Hacking competitions have been gaining popularity in recent years, both as sport and to train students for jobs in cybersecurity. By carrying out attacks, students learn to uncover weak spots in security systems and, in turn, build better defenses. On Friday, students will use computers that have hidden vulnerabilities already built-in.— AP

TECH AND SECURITY EXPERTS BACK APPLE

SAN FRANCISCO: The nation's leading tech companies joined security experts, independent programmers and civil liberties advocates who filed court papers backing Apple in its fight with the FBI over an encrypted iPhone used by an extremist killer.

Several law enforcement groups, meanwhile, filed briefs in support of federal authorities who are seeking Apple's help in hacking an encrypted iPhone used by Syed Farook, one of the San Bernardino mass shooters.

These "friend of the court" briefs come in advance of a March 22 hearing in which Apple is asking U.S. Magistrate Sheri Pym to reverse an order requiring Apple to create a software program that overrides iPhone security features. That program would let authorities try to unlock Farook's phone by guessing its passcode; Apple says it would make all other iPhones more vulnerable to future attacks.

Relatives of five people who were killed, along with one survivor of the Dec 2 attack, also filed a brief saying the FBI's request is lawful and calling Apple's concerns "speculative." The relatives argued the phone might contain useful leads or even "explain the motive for this senseless tragedy." But the husband of another survivor submitted a letter on Apple's behalf, saying he believes the order would set a bad precedent and adding that he doesn't believe the phone has any useful information.

Rewrite the rules

The case has pitted top officials of the Obama administration against one of the world's most admired and profitable companies. US Attorney General Loretta Lynch this week suggested Apple was trying to rewrite the rules for what she characterized as routine steps taken by law enforcement investigators. But some of Apple's biggest competitors rose to its defense in a joint legal brief submitted Thursday.

"The government's position, if it prevails, will undermine the security of America's most sensitive data," states a filing from Google, Facebook, Microsoft, Amazon, Yahoo and ten other companies. "The law does not allow federal agents to conscript companies into defeating their own security safeguards and product designs." — AFP



GENEVA: The Mercedes Concept Car is shown during the press day at the 86th International Motor Show. — AP

DIFFERENT PATHS MAY LEAD TO AUTONOMOUS VEHICLES

EVERYDAY CARS ARE GETTING GRADUALLY SMARTER

GENEVA: Cars that drive themselves would mean a revolution in how people get around. But they might arrive just as much by evolution, with everyday cars getting gradually smarter, as by sudden shifts to fully self-driving vehicles.

Autonomous driving - and its potential for sweeping change - was much on the minds of top auto executives at the Geneva International Motor Show. The exhibit space in Geneva was mostly used for the show's primary purpose: showing off product to the news media and the public in order to boost sales. The display stands were dominated by expensive sports and luxury cars for the rich and new SUVs for more middle-class buyers.

But the future beyond the upcoming model year was very much a topic of discussion, if less visible on the display stands. Executives think that cars that drive themselves at least part of the time may be upon us by the end of this decade. Technology such as autonomous driving by cars equipped with cameras and radar sensors could blend with Internet connections and apps. For instance, a car could be ordered for a few hours through an app and drive itself to the customer.

Google, meanwhile, is testing completely autonomous cars on streets in Mountain View, California, Austin, Texas, and Kirkland, Washington. Daimler CEO Dieter Zetsche said his company sees "two roads to full autonomy, one being the more evolutionary one where basically more and more assistance systems kind of automatically lead to a fully

autonomous car."

"The other one is more revolutionary ... where first in restricted areas you have fully autonomous cars and over time you expand the area where you can do that," he said. "And I would say in restricted areas you can see fully autonomous cars in the latter path around the turn of the decade."

Avoid collisions

Some vehicles at the Geneva show made the case for evolution. The Mercedes-Benz E-Class luxury sedan from Daimler AG already offers wide-ranging, optional driver assistance technology. The latest version of the car can avoid collisions at intersections by recognizing crossing traffic and braking. It can help drivers fight crosswinds, automatically brake for pedestrians, warn drivers if they're getting drowsy, and park itself. It can assist avoidance maneuvering, first by helping the driver steer and then by bringing the car back onto a straight path in a controlled way afterward.

Nissan says its Qashqai crossover SUV - that is, a sport-utility with some car-like features - will be equipped with what the company calls "stage one" autonomous driving technology that lets it drive itself in single-lane heavy traffic conditions on freeways. Nissan says it will have a full range of vehicles with autonomous technology by 2020 "on mainstream, mass-market cars at affordable prices."

Nissan also showed off its IDS, for intelligent driving system, concept car, with a steering wheel that retracts when not needed. Car companies are

determined that they - not tech companies such as Google or Apple or a new entry such as ride-sharing service Uber - will provide the technology and reap the profits. They don't want to play the role of Taiwan manufacturer Foxconn Technology Group, which makes smartphones for Apple: as contractors for a technology firm.

One token of that is the appearance of auto executives on turf usually associated with the tech industry such as the CES electronics show in Las Vegas. Ford CEO Mark Fields spoke at the Mobile World Congress in Barcelona about the company's plans for semi-autonomous functions such as cars that deal with traffic jams and parking, and its fully autonomous vehicle development program.

Some analysts talk about cars as a service, something you order for a few hours or day when needed, instead of something you own. General Motors, for instance, has started an app-based car-sharing program, Maven, with 21 vehicles parked around the University of Michigan campus in Ann Arbor, Michigan. That idea could eventually merge with vehicle autonomy. Analyst Colin Bird from IHS Automotive said that ride-sharing services such as Uber and car-sharing such as GM's Maven or Daimler's Car2Go would "in the long term merge into one thing, a highly autonomous on demand network of cars. That's the long-term vision." Carmakers, he said, "see that coming down the pike and they want to be involved in that, they don't want Uber, or somebody else, to take that from them." — AP