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EGYPT

E-government for Egypt?

Conference debates the merits of taking public life on-line

CAIRO

The director of a German technology security company hired by an Egyptian bank and several governmental authorities said electronic government services would reduce queues and corruption.

"E-government saves you time; you can go and do whatever you want at the time you want," whether applying online for a passport or national identity card or even voting, said Amas Chbib of the Advanced German Technology company. "We can go through these steps without corruption," he added, referring to the common practice of slipping in extra money to hasten services provided by the cumbersome bureaucracy that supports nearly 70 million inhabitants.

But once Cairo financial institutions and telecom companies can prevent security breaches into their computer and telephone networks, they will have to customize their services for Egyptians to be successful, Chbib said.

Simple security solutions include replacing photo ID checks with fingerprint scans for women in head scarves, and accommodating long Muslim family names. Chbib was one of a group of IT scholars from more than a dozen countries that spelled out methods for foiling hacking, computer viruses, industrial espionage, and other kinds of cyber crime that hinder the kind of electronic business common in the West, such as on-line bill payment and bank account transfers.

Among Middle Eastern countries, Egypt is the main producer of information technology and ranks third after Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates among computer users.

A Cairo-based Information Technology Institute professor said securing Egypt's computer networks would also improve the developing country's efficiency in business and government, provided change comes from within.

"In Egypt, we need our background

Firms will have to customize their services for Egyptians to be successful

to be very solid in build information security tools... and we have to do it ourselves," said Mohammed Salem, one of the organizers of the two-day First International Conference on Information and Communications Technology in Cairo. Salem emphasized the importance of making IT part of Egyptian culture through existing government programs to raise technology-savvy children with computers in schools and universities.

"I hope Egypt will reach the stage where all Egyptians are very familiar with information technology and we have a base of experts that not only competes with a country like India but is more efficient," he said. (AFP)