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May 29, 2009

Secretary Timothy F. Geithner
Department of the Treasury
1500 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20220

Dear Secretary Geithner:

Last month, President Obama took steps to authorize greater telecommunications links with the Cuban people with the stated goal of increasing their ability to communicate with one another and with persons outside of Cuba.

The policy of increasing access to information among Cubans using telecommunications and the Internet is laudable and important.

With that in mind, we are deeply concerned that Instant Messaging services for Cubans and persons living in other countries under sanctions by the U.S. have been discontinued.

According to published reports, at least one U.S. provider – Microsoft and its Windows Live Messenger Service – has stopped offering IM to users in Cuba, Syria, Iran, Sudan, and North Korea. Yahoo, Google, and AOL may have taken similar actions. Microsoft is declining to reveal whether it pulled the plug on IM access in these countries at the behest of the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control or did so voluntarily.

No matter where this idea originated, it is a huge mistake to cut off Cubans and others from Instant Messaging, thus depriving them of access to an important source of connectivity and information.

We think it is vital for the Treasury Department to investigate these reports and to disclose publically whether Microsoft or any other I/M provider is disconnecting persons from I/M in sanctioned countries because they think U.S. sanctions require them to do so, or because the Treasury Department has told them to do so.

Our country should stand for broadening access to information, not curtailing it. Either these companies should be advised to resume the services or, if the impetus came from OFAC, this policy should be reexamined and reversed. Access to I/M in these countries should be restored.

Sincerely,

Sarah Stephens

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