Verizon Says It Did Not Give Customer Records to NSA

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Verizon Communications Inc. yesterday denied that its local and mobile phone businesses had turned over customer calling records to the National Security Agency but did not address whether MCI Corp., the long-distance company it bought in January, may have done so.

The comments by Verizon followed a statement from BellSouth Corp., on Monday saying a preliminary investigation found that it had not given such customer information en masse to the NSA. A report last week in USA Today said the two companies and AT&T Inc. had done so to help the government fight terrorism.

USA Today said yesterday that it was confident of its coverage but that it would not dismiss the BellSouth and Verizon statements out of hand and would keep investigating the matter.
Industry analysts said it was possible that the government sought customer information only on long-distance calls. If that were the case, it probably would have approached the major long-distance companies in operation after the Sept. 11 attacks. Those included AT&T Corp., since acquired by SBC, which took the name AT&T Inc.; MCI; Sprint Corp., which has since merged with Nextel Communications Corp. to form Sprint Nextel Corp.; and Qwest Communications International Inc., whose former chairman and chief executive said last week that the company was asked to cooperate with the NSA but declined.

"How do you explain that BellSouth and Verizon were not asked but Qwest was asked? It may be because Qwest has a long-haul network, and thus is in a different position than those two companies," said Philip J. Weiser, a University of Colorado law professor and former Justice Department telecommunications specialist.

The report has triggered a national debate over whether gathering such information would be justified by the Sept. 11 attacks, prompted calls in Congress for an investigation, and led to class-action lawsuits against the three companies, which are by far the largest telephone service providers in the United States.

New York-based Verizon said yesterday that it would not confirm or deny any relationship with the NSA, but that "one of the most glaring and repeated falsehoods in the media reporting is the assertion that, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Verizon was approached by the NSA and entered into an arrangement to provide the NSA with data from its customers' domestic calls. This is false."

The statement outlined the three major businesses that Verizon ran between Sept. 11, 2001, and the MCI acquisition four months ago: wireline phone, wireless phone and directory publishing. The company "also had its own Internet service provider and long-distance businesses," the statement said. "Contrary to the media reports, Verizon was not asked by NSA to provide, nor did Verizon provide, customer phone records from any of these businesses, or any call data from those records."

"None of these companies -- wireless or wireline -- provided customer records or call data."

Verizon also denied published reports that information about local telephone calls is being tracked. "Phone companies do not even make records of local calls in most cases because the vast majority of customers are not billed per call for local calls," Verizon said. But it did not mention the MCI long-distance business.

AT&T declined to comment yesterday, as did Sprint Nextel.

The USA Today report said only records of telephone calls -- who called whom at what time and for how long -- were being collected by the NSA, and it stressed that calls themselves were not being monitored.

Yesterday, a reporter asked President Bush why Americans should not feel their privacy has been violated if the government collects lists of their calls. "The American people expect their government..."
to protect them within the laws of this country, and I'm going to continue to do just that," Bush said.

"We got accused of not connecting dots prior to September the 11th. And we're going to connect dots to protect the American people within the law," he said, repeating his comments last week that congressional leaders had been briefed on the government's efforts, which he did not detail.

*Staff researcher Julie Tate contributed to this report.*