Due to the nature of on-going censorship attempts by the Government of Pakistan (this, as a result of General Musharaff's imposition of martial law in the country, formerly known as a state of emergency), the Society Against Internet Censorship in Pakistan started blogging live updates on the situation as it unfolded on the ground. While many activists worked 24 hours into the crisis, some groups saw the need for an SMS-based reporting and co-ordination system for information clearing to provide support for a civil disobedience movement against martial law. This was to be in the form of flash peace rallies and candlelight vigils, among many other initiatives that members of civil society deemed necessary and practical.

Although some of the major news agencies were reporting that SMS and cell phone coverage had been jammed, it was only partially true with parts of Islamabad being taken off at times. However, given some of the activists' experience with disaster relief communications, many groups knew that SMS couldn't be censored (Pakistan's Telecoms Authority generally use cheap mobile jamming devices which had proven ineffective in the past). Added to the fears that the internet may be taken offline in the weeks ahead (this hasn't happened in Pakistan yet) and the growing concerns over the clampdown of independent media in Pakistan, a coalition of various non-profit organizations, left-wing political parties, NGOs and human rights organizations, labour and trade-union federations, academics, students, and concerned citizens was formed as an umbrella group to resist the 'emergency' in Pakistan. It was decided to deploy SMS to aid efforts in getting factual/accurate information flowing in a two-way manner for the people by the people, from reliable sources embedded in various locations to the masses and those concerned overseas. This information was designed to feed to and from international sources, such as student-organized peace rallies and movements in places like Washington DC and national marches by the ABA (American Bar Association) to the Supreme Court of the US, to events in the UK and elsewhere, as well as collect messages of support from leaders of parties. With the use of print or traditional broadcast media out of the question, the groups turned to text messaging. Not only is SMS accessible by citizens in Pakistan, it also provides a channel to report and provide information to others overseas.

The groups evaluated various SMS broadcasting techniques and solutions based on a core need of anonymous, reliable messaging. They primarily had to ensure that identities would not be revealed to the telecoms authority. Four options were discussed. SMPP would likely be shut down after the first broadcast since all operators in Pakistan have LI (Lawful Interception) set up and housed at the premises of ISI (Pakistan's Intelligence Agency, equivalent to the CIA and FBI in the US). The second option was to use SMPP based connectivity to a foreign operator, for example in Dubai or South Africa, but it would take time to establish stable links into an overseas operator, time the groups didn't have. A third option was an API provided by a local operator but, again, as soon as the LI started monitoring suspicious activity, it would have been shut down.

The final option was SIM-based SMS, which is where FrontlineSMS came into play. The groups decided that using a cellular phone connected to a PC was the most anonymous and rapidly deployable solution available to them. One downside – that the location of the hub may be pinpointed using triangulation – could be mitigated by shifting locations, or even using a laptop and driving around when broadcasting SMS alerts and related communications. FrontlineSMS allows this portability. At present the groups have a global instance of FrontlineSMS set up to collect messages broadcast out of the country, and are setting up a number of satellite hubs in Pakistan itself to allow messages to be returned.

The use of FrontlineSMS in Pakistan builds on increasing interest in the software from the human rights and activist communities. As is often the case in these situations, rapidly deployable, scalable solutions are often the most appropriate.

Further information on the use of FrontlineSMS in Pakistan will be made available as events unfold, and the respective groups deem it safe to do so.

www.frontlinesms.com