

UAE loosens restrictions, but most popular apps still barred

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The UAE has ambitions to become a major technological power, but it has harsh cybercrime laws

The United Arab Emirates on Monday loosened restrictions on a number of messaging applications as residents work and study from home during

a coronavirus lockdown, but it maintained the bar on WhatsApp and FaceTime.

Google Hangouts Meet, Cisco Webex, Avaya Spaces, BlueJeans and Slack are all available "on an exceptional basis and until further notice", the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) said in a statement.

The move is part of the UAE's "efforts to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus and the ongoing effort to support [distance learning](#)," it said.

Several other applications—Microsoft Teams, Skype for Business, Zoom and Blackboard were made accessible earlier in March when the crisis hit.

However, Skype can only be used by companies, according to the TRA, and popular free calling services including WhatsApp and FaceTime remain out of bounds.

The UAE which has registered 611 cases of the coronavirus and five deaths, has imposed a night-time curfew, urged residents not to go out during the day, and imposed remote working practices on institutions and [private companies](#).

On Monday, the education ministry also announced that schools will operate by distance education until the end of the academic year in June.

In recent years, the UAE has made clear its ambition to become a major technological power, but it has harsh cybercrime laws and maintains what civil society groups call a high level of online restrictions and surveillance.

Even though more than nine million expatriates make up 90 percent of

the population, free voice over internet protocol (VoIP) telephony has been largely inaccessible through normal internet services.

In December, the New York Times accused the UAE intelligence services of using a popular new app, ToTok, to spy on users.

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