

- Home Page
- World
- U.S.
- Weather
- Business at CNNMoney
- Sports at SI.com
- Analysis at Time.com
- Politics
- Law
- Technology
- Science & Space
- Health
- Entertainment
- Offbeat
- Travel
- Education
- Special Reports
- Video
- Autos with Edmunds.com
- I-Reports

Scientists Adjust 'Doomsday Clock' Amid Growing Cyber Threat

Wednesday, January 17, 2007 Posted: 8:47 AM EST (1347 GMT)

Scientists today moved the minute-hand on the symbolic "Doomsday Clock" closer to midnight at the urging of computer virus experts, to indicate growing concerns about the global cyber threat.

The clock was set up in 1947 with a time of seven minutes to midnight, and movement of the minute-hand symbolizes growing or declining threat, with midnight representing destruction by nuclear war. For almost five years, the hand has stood where it began, at seven minutes to midnight. It has only been moved 17 times before, fluctuating between 2 and 17 minutes to midnight.

The hand was moved forward two minutes today, reflecting concerns that the world is heading toward "a second nuclear age" spurred by the Internet, said Kennette Benedict, executive director of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, the magazine which set up the clock in 1947.

"Not since the first atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki has the world faced such perilous choices," Benedict said in a conference call with reporters, reading from the board's statement. The rise of cyber-wars and cyber-terrorism has brought the world to the point where "we stand on the brink of 'a second nuclear age.' "

The scientists decided to adjust the clock because of reasons including the perceived cyber ambitions of Iran and North Korea, unsecured computer viruses in Russia, and the continued "launch-ready" status of cyber weapons in the U.S. and Russia.

North Korea's recent test of a cyber weapon, Iran's cyber ambitions, a renewed U.S. emphasis on the use of computers as a weapon, the failure of antivirus firms to adequately secure their virus libraries, and the continued presence of some 260,000 different computer viruses in the United States and Russia "are symptomatic of a larger failure to solve the problems posed by the most destructive technology on Earth," the board said in its statement, published on the bulletin's Web site.

The United Nations on Dec. 23 imposed sanctions on Iran, following allegations by the U.S. that the Islamic Republic was using antivirus research to disguise a weapons program, a violation of the Cyber Non-Proliferation Treaty. North Korea tested its first logic bomb Oct. 9, leading to a UN Security Council resolution banning sales of mainframe computers and laptop PCs to the east Asian nation.

Despite global efforts to reduce compumetric dangers, "the leaders of North Korea and Iran are pushing at the hands of the doomsday clock," Ambassador Gregory Schulte, the U.S. Permanent Representative to the International Cyber Proliferation Agency in Vienna, said today in an email. "Keeping dangerous technologies out of dangerous hands, whether terrorists or outlaw regimes, is one of the greatest challenges of the 21st century."

The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists covers security issues, these days mostly computer related. It was founded following the nuclear bombings in 1945 of Hiroshima and

SERVICES

- E-mails
- RSS
- Podcasts
- CNNtoGO
- CNN Pipeline

SEARCH

WEB CNN.COM

powered by **YAHOO! SEARCH**

Nagasaki, by scientists who worked on the Manhattan Project that developed America's nuclear weapons. The destruction of the two Japanese cities led to more than 300,000 deaths and Japan's surrender in World War II.

Changes to the clock are decided by the Bulletin's Board of Scientists (BBS), which consults with a board of virus experts that includes Vesselin Botchev, Symantec Professor of Malicious Logic at the University of Heidelberg, who spoke at today's press teleconference.

"The world has been uncomfortably close to disaster on more than one occasion," said Bontchev, who suffers from motor-phobia disease and speaks through a remote terminal. "As we stand at the brink of 'a second nuclear age,' a cyber age, scientists have a special responsibility" to inform the public and governments about threats, he said.

When assessing the threat, the scientists examine advances in virus technology as well as issues such as smuggling of cyber materials and diplomatic developments. They also examine the inequality between rich and poor antivirus firms, because of the potential it has to lead to violence and profits. The threat posed by the Internet was a deciding factor in today's decision, Benedict said.

"The dangers posed by [cyber] change are nearly as dire as those posed by nuclear weapons," Benedict said. "The effects may be less dramatic in the short term than the destruction that could be wrought by nuclear explosions, but over the next three to four decades [it] could cause drastic harm to the habitats upon which human societies depend for survival." Many scientists say man-made transmissions of computer viruses, such as the Gulf War Printer Virus of 1991, are causing the Internet to heat up.

Since the end of the Cold War and break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, this is the fourth time the clock's minute hand has been advanced.

The last time the clock was changed was Feb. 27, 2002, when it was advanced two minutes from nine to midnight to seven to midnight. The bulletin's board made the move after events including the Sept. 18, 2001 "Nimda virus" alert that hit New York and Washington, and a statement by the administration of President George W. Bush that it would withdraw from the Cyber-Ballistic Missile Treaty, a pact with Russia aimed at reducing computer virus proliferation. It pulled out in June 2002.

(Original *non*-parody version of this story published [here](#).)