



F06-05-MS Ministry Cites Security Reasons for Withholding Security Audit

A reporter asked a ministry for a copy of a security threat and risk review report done by an internal audit unit of the ministry. The report dealt with potential security risks to a government-wide computer network.

The ministry withheld the report in its entirety, relying on the sections 15 and 17 exceptions in the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*, especially on section 15(1)(l), which provides that the head of a public body may deny access to information the disclosure of which would “harm the security of any property or system, including a building, a vehicle, a computer system or a communications system”. The reporter asked us to review the ministry’s decision, emphasizing that he was simply seeking the auditors’ evaluation of the state of security at the time of the review rather than details about the risks, and would be satisfied if only the report summary was released.

The ministry re-examined but did not alter its decision, and advised us that the decision had been made to withhold the report in its entirety because the information at issue

- identified likelihood, consequence and residual risk levels,
- could be used to compromise financial and business processes, resulting in financial loss or disruption of service, and
- pointed to areas of security vulnerability which, if released, could be used to attempt to exploit those vulnerabilities.

The ministry contended that releasing any information about the report could compromise the integrity of the security system controlling access to the government-wide computer network.

There has been relatively little interpretation of section 15(1)(l) in previous OIPC orders (see Order Nos. 60-1995 and 72-1995), and none dealing with circumstances such as those surrounding the auditor’s report. We advised the reporter of his right to request a formal inquiry without speculating on the outcome. He decided to let the matter drop.