

Dozens held in Philippines over global 'sextortion' ring

MANILA, PHILLIPPINES - Dozens of people have been arrested in the Philippines in a multinational crackdown on the exploding global menace of Internet "sextortion", Interpol and local police said.



At least 58 people were arrested in the Philippines in connection with 'sextortion' says Police Chief Alan Purisima. Image: Twitter

Industrial-style businesses run out of the Philippines have blackmailed hundreds of people around the world, luring them on social media before extracting sexually explicit information or images, they said.

Interpol Cyber-crime Chief Sanjay Virmani said 58 people were arrested this week in the Philippines, but emphasised they were only a small part of a fast-growing phenomenon with similar operations in many other parts of the world.

"The scale of these sextortion networks is massive, and run with just one goal in mind: to make money regardless of the terrible emotional damage they inflict on their victims," said Virmani, director of Interpol's Digital Crime Centre.

Virmani said "sextortion" had emerged as a major concern in recent years as criminals took advantage of more people using social media and greater mobile Internet access via smartphones.

Taste of things to come

"This is just a taste of things to come," Virmani said.

"These type of criminal acts have gone on for a long time but they are using a new infrastructure. All the traditional crimes that you see that have a cyber component are taken to a new level and criminals have an increased capability to target new victims," he said.

In one case highlighted by Interpol, a 17-year-old boy in Scotland who lived with his parents committed suicide after being blackmailed.

Three Filipinos linked to that scam were among those arrested this week.

Philippine Police Chief Alan Purisima said the 58 people detained would be charged over a range of crimes, including engaging in child pornography, extortion and using technologies to commit fraud.

Purisima said the scam typically involved the extorters creating fake identities of attractive, young women to make contact with people overseas via Facebook and other social media.

"After getting acquainted with the victims they engage in cybersex, and this will be recorded unknown to the victims," he said, adding pornographic content was used to lure them into the sexual acts.

"They then threaten to release it to friends and relatives," he said.

Blackmail



Interpol's Sanjay Virmani says 'sextortion' is a growing problem in all areas around the world. Image: [Inquirer](#)

Blackmail demands ranged from US\$500 to US\$15,000, according to Interpol, which described extremely well-run businesses controlled by organised crime gangs.

"Operating on an almost industrial scale from call-centre-style offices, such cyber-blackmail agents are provided with training and offered bonus incentives such as holidays, cash or mobile phones for reaching their financial targets," an Interpol statement said.

Police regularly report raids on cybersex operations, such as those in which children perform sexual acts in front of webcams, but last week's announcement was the first major bust involving "sextortion".



A woman in the US has been accused of extorting money from a Detroit businessman over text messages and images in her possession. Image: [WXYZ](#)

Authorities involved in the multinational taskforce told reporters the scammers targeted people of varying ages in countries as diverse as Indonesia, Singapore, the United States, Australia and Scotland.

Detective Chief Inspector Gary Cunningham, from the Scottish police force's major investigation team, said the 17-year-old boy hurled himself from the top of a bridge last year after being blackmailed.

"He just engaged in a chat online and then engaged with the suspect, who then caught him in a web act, threatened to send that worldwide and then made various demands for money which resulted in (the boy) taking his own life," Cunningham said.

Philippine police said the blackmailers initially made contact with the boy via Facebook.

'Sextortion' growing rapidly

Hong Kong police said more than 600 people in the Chinese territory, many aged between 20 and 30, had fallen victim to the scam since the beginning of last year.

Chief Inspector Louis Kwan, from the Hong Kong police force's commercial crime bureau, said victims had often paid the bribes, sent via money transfer services, but were blackmailed repeatedly.

Kwan said some victims paid up to three times before going to the police.

Authorities emphasised the Philippines was not the hub of the global scams, and said "Operation Strikeback" was expected to be the first of many multinational efforts to combat the scourge.

"These crimes are not limited to any one country and nor are the victims.

That's why international co-operation in investigating these crimes is essential," Interpol's Virmani said.

Interpol said that in addition to Asia-based networks, people and groups were running similar operations out of Africa that typically targeted Europeans.

Globally, the number of victims could run to the "thousands, quite possibly", though many were reluctant to go to the police "maybe out of embarrassment of being outed", Virmani said.

Source: AFP via I-Net Bridge

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