

International

UK-led police operation busts phone scammers

International criminal network target thousands of victims

LONDON: UK police on Thursday said their biggest ever counter-fraud operation had disrupted an international criminal network targeting hundreds of thousands of victims in millions of spam phone calls. The Metropolitan Police spearheaded the 18-month global probe into the iSpooof.cc website, working with Europol, the FBI and other law enforcement agencies worldwide. A total of 142 people have been arrested, including one of its alleged London-based administrators. Suspects were nabbed in Australia, France, Ireland and the Netherlands, while servers were shuttered in the Netherlands and Ukraine.

UK police believe organized crime groups are linked to the website and its tens of thousands of users. The site enables users to access software tools to illicitly obtain victims' bank account funds and commit other fraud. Met Commissioner Mark Rowley said the investigation signaled "a different approach" to criminals exploiting technology. "This is about starting from the organized criminals that actually drive and create the fraud that we see in the

world around us," he told reporters.

The London force—the UK's largest—said in the year to August, suspects paid to access the website and make more than 10 million fraudulent calls worldwide. Around 40 percent were in the United States. More than a third were in the UK, targeting 200,000 potential victims there alone. Fraud detection agencies have so far recorded £48 million (\$58 million) in losses in the UK alone. Victims lost an average £10,000. The largest single theft was worth three million pounds. Losses to victims worldwide are estimated at over £100 million. "Because fraud is vastly under-reported, the full amount is believed to be much higher," the Met said. Those behind the site earned almost £3.2 million from it, the force added.

Only around 5,000 British victims have so far been identified. However, the Met's investigation has yielded the phone numbers of more than 70,000 potential victims, who have yet to be contacted. The force will attempt to reach them over the next two days, sending text messages directing those contacted to its website, where details can be safely

logged. "What we're doing here is trying to industrialize our response to the organized criminals' industrialization of the problem," Rowley added.

'Operation Elaborate'

The iSpooof website—described as "an international one-stop spoofing shop"—was created in December 2020 and at its peak had 59,000 users paying between £150 and £5,000 for its services, according to the Met. It enabled subscribers, who could pay in Bitcoin, to access so-called spoofing tools which made their phone numbers appear as if they were calling from banks, tax offices and other official bodies.

The mostly commonly imitated organizations include some of the UK's biggest consumer banks—including Barclays, Halifax, HSBC, Lloyds and Santander. Combined with customers' bank and login details, illegally obtained elsewhere online, the criminals were then able to defraud their victims. "They would worry them (about) fraudulent activity on their bank accounts and tricked them," explained

Detective Superintendent Helen Rance, who leads on cyber crime for the Met.

She noted that people contacted would typically be instructed to share six-digit banking passcodes allowing their accounts to be emptied. The Met launched "Operation Elaborate" in June 2021, partnering with Dutch police, who had already started their own probe after an iSpooof server was based there. A subsequent server operating in Kyiv was shuttered in September and the site was permanently disabled on November 8.

The previous day the Met had charged Teejai Fletcher, 34, of east London, with fraud and organized crime group offences. He remains in custody and will next appear in a London court on December 6. "It's fair to say that he was living a lavish lifestyle," Rance said, noting that the investigation remained ongoing. "Instead of just taking down the website and arresting the administrator, we have gone after the users of iSpooof," she added. Two other suspected administrators outside the UK remain at large, the Met noted. —AFP

Spain PM sets sights on international role

MADRID: Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez will on Sunday become president of an international socialist grouping, a potential springboard to a major post on the world stage. A year before a general election in Spain, which polls suggest he will struggle to win, Sanchez is the only candidate to head the Socialist International (SI) — an umbrella group of 132 centre-left parties from around the world.

The telegenic 50-year-old will take over the reins of the SI, which is gathering in Madrid this weekend, from former Greek prime minister George Papandreu. "While symbolic... this post could be a way (for Sanchez) to regain credit among voters by presenting himself as influential on the world stage," said Pablo Simon, political science professor at the Carlos III University.

"But it also could be that he plans on capitalizing on this network of international contacts" which the post offers to "play a prominent role later" in a top global body, he added. Former Portuguese prime minister Antonio Guterres led the International Socialist before he went on to head the United Nations refugee agency in 2005 and then become UN secretary general in 2017. "All prime ministers who love foreign affairs have a tendency to look for an international post to secure a post-governmental career," said Teneo Intelligence analyst Antonio Barroso.

'More weight'

Sanchez has made international affairs a priority since he came to power in June 2018, in contrast to his conservative predecessor Mariano Rajoy, and has sought to boost Spain's influence in the European Union. Within days of taking office, Sanchez made international headlines by agreeing to take in migrants from the Aquarius rescue ship who were rejected by

other European nations.

The first modern Spanish premier to speak English fluently, Sanchez served as chief of staff to the UN high representative to Bosnia during the Kosovo conflict. He has fostered good relations with France and Germany, which has made Spain "one of the engines of European politics", said Simon, citing as an example Madrid's lead in talks over the energy crisis sparked by the war in Ukraine. Sanchez successfully lobbied to have his foreign minister, Josep Borrell, appointed as European Union foreign policy chief in 2019.

"Spain has much more weight in the European Union debate than 10 years ago," said Barroso, adding the premier had "boosted Spain's credibility" with its "European partners". Beyond the EU, Sanchez hosted a crucial NATO summit in Madrid in June, just four months after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and has "reconnected" with Latin America, which has shifted to the left in recent years, said Simon. Sanchez visited four Latin American countries in August 2018, his first official trip outside Europe, in what was seen as an effort to underscore the region as a priority of his foreign policy.

With Biden and Macron

During the recent G20 summit in Indonesia, Sanchez posted a photo of himself meeting German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, French President Emmanuel Macron, British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and US President Joe Biden. Seen as an attempt to burnish his credentials on international affairs, the photo was much mocked on social media. But Ignacio Molina, a senior analyst at the Elcano Royal Institute think tank, said he believes Sanchez's priority is to remain Spanish prime minister after the general election, which is expected at the end of 2023.

The speculation about a possible senior role for Sanchez at a global body comes from Spain's opposition parties, which have "spread the idea that he uses international meetings to prepare his future in case of an electoral defeat next year", Molina said. "I don't think he's deliberately developing an international network for personal reasons." —AFP



CASTELLON DE LA PLANA: Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez flanked by Spain's Minister of Foreign Affairs Jose Manuel Albarez, Spain's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Labor and Social Economy Yolanda Diaz and Spain's Minister of Defense Margarita Robles attend a Romania-Spain summit in Castellon de la Plana, eastern Spain on November 23, 2022. —AFP

Serb women in Kosovo protest 'ghettoisation'

MITROVICA: Hundreds of Serbian women demonstrated in Kosovo on Wednesday, in protest against ethnic-Albanian authorities who they accused of seeking to "ghettoise" the Serb minority. The protest in the north of Mitrovica—long a flashpoint between Serbs and ethnic Albanians—took place as Serbian and Kosovar officials try to find a solution to a row over number plates. The dispute erupted after Kosovo said the country's ethnic Serbs would be fined if they did not swap vehicle licence plates issued by Serbia for registration numbers issued by Pristina.

The underlying source of tension is Kosovo's 2008 declaration of independence from Serbia. The latter does not recognize the move and has encouraged Kosovo's Serb minority to remain loyal to Belgrade.

The dispute has sounded alarm bells in the European Union, which has been seeking to normalise ties between Serbia and Kosovo and wants both to refrain from provocative gestures.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said late Wednesday that Kosovo and Serbia had agreed to steps to take some of the heat out of a long-running dispute. "Very pleased to announce that (the) chief negotiators of Kosovo and Serbia under EU-facilitation have agreed to measures to avoid further escalation," he tweeted. Borrell said the deal reached by both sides entailed Serbia ceasing to issue licence plates with markings indicating Kosovo cities, and Kosovo "will cease further actions related to re-registration of vehicles".

He tweeted after hosting Kosovar Prime Minister Albin Kurti and Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic in Brussels for negotiations. Earlier in the day, protesters in the city of Mitrovica accused Kurti of "terror" and "inhuman treatment" as they marched through the streets of the northern city. Some held up placards that read "women united to liberate the ghetto" and "I want peace". —AFP

Amnesty commission holds first...

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number of public prosecution and interior ministry officials. The committee commenced its work by providing lists of names of convicted citizens whose cases are applicable to article one of the decree.

An Amiri decree was issued on Monday granting a special amnesty to an unspecified number of mainly Kuwaiti political prisoners who had been convicted to

years of jail terms for violating freedom of speech laws. The decree stipulates to grant an amnesty to a number of Kuwaiti citizens jailed for committing crimes from Nov 16, 2011 until the end of 2021.

Based on the decree, the amnesty will cover prisoners who were convicted for carrying out acts of aggression against a foreign country that could threaten Kuwait's security. It also includes those jailed for spreading false news about the internal situation of Kuwait that could undermine the position of the country. The amnesty will also include prisoners jailed for publicly insulting the authority of HH the Amir by any means, whether in writing or in speech. It will also include those convicted for misusing their phones to threaten others or the security of the state. —Agencies

Schools were also closed in the nearby towns of Rabigh and Khulais "to preserve the safety of male and female students", SPA said. The kingdom is in the middle of final exams, yet schools had already been closed nationwide on Wednesday after King Salman declared a holiday following Saudi Arabia's shock defeat of Argentina in the World Cup. Winter rainstorms and flooding occur almost every year in Jeddah, where residents have long decried poor infrastructure. Floods killed 123 people in the city in 2009 and 10 more two years later. —AFP

2 dead as storm shuts schools...

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The official Saudi Press Agency reported before dawn that schools in the city would temporarily be closed as rains were forecast to continue throughout the day.



JEDDAH: Youths walk in a flooded street following heavy rains in this Saudi coastal city on Nov 24, 2022. —AFP

Anwar sworn in as Malaysia's...

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fundamental rules of good governance, no corruption and Malaysia for all Malaysians," Anwar said.

He said his multiethnic Pakatan Harapan coalition had been able to secure a majority after gaining seats from old foes in the former ruling bloc Barisan Nasional and another party in Sarawak state on Borneo island. Anwar's coalition campaigned on an anti-graft message and won the most seats in the election with 82. That was ahead of the 73 won by former prime minister Muhyiddin Yassin's Malay-centric Perikatan Nasional bloc but still well short of the 112 needed for a majority.

Both leaders were summoned by the king this week in an attempt to break the deadlock but no deal could be struck. The king then held a special meeting with other royals on Thursday before the palace announced Anwar as the new premier. Seeking to boost the legitimacy of his appointment, Anwar said his coalition would propose a vote of confidence in parliament on Dec 19.

Anwar's supporters were in a celebratory mood in the capital, Kuala Lumpur. "I got goosebumps, seriously," said 36-year-old Norhafizah Ashruff Hassan. "He fought hard to be given the chance to be PM. I hope he performs well and proves his worth." Muhammad Taufiq Zamri, a 37-year-old product manager said: "I cannot express in words the ecstatic feeling I have." Anwar said he had received a congratulatory phone call from Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan just before his news conference.

The premiership is the culmination of a 25-year rollercoaster for Anwar. The firebrand former student activist was first poised to take the reins in the late 1990s, after serving as finance chief and deputy prime minister under Malaysia's political patriarch Mahathir Mohamad. But the two had a bitter

falling-out over how to handle the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis.

Mahathir sacked his former protege, who was also expelled from their then-party the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), and charged with corruption and sodomy. Anwar said the charges were politically motivated. Anwar was sentenced to six years in jail for corruption in 1999 and then given an additional nine on a sodomy charge the following year. Street protests erupted and evolved into a movement for democratic reforms, with Anwar stringing together an opposition coalition from behind bars.

The Mahathir-Anwar tussle has dominated and shaped Malaysian politics over the past four decades, "alternately bringing despair and hope, progress and regress to the country's polity", according to Oh Ei Sun of the Pacific Research Center of Malaysia. The Malaysian Supreme Court overturned Anwar's sodomy conviction in 2004 and ordered him freed.

Anwar re-aligned with Mahathir during the 2018 elections, when his nonagenarian foe came out of retirement to challenge incumbent Najib Razak, who was mired in the billion-dollar 1MDB financial scandal. Their detente scored a historic victory against UMNO and Najib, who is now serving a 12-year jail term for corruption. Mahathir became prime minister for the second time, with an agreement to eventually hand the premiership to Anwar. He never fulfilled that pact and their alliance collapsed after 22 months.

In his most recent bid to lead Southeast Asia's third-largest economy, Anwar once again pledged to end corruption and cultivate multi-ethnic harmony. "This is a long time coming for Anwar Ibrahim," Asrul Hadi Abdullah Sani, deputy managing director at strategic advisory firm Bower Group Asia, told AFP. James Chin, a professor of Asian studies at the University of Tasmania, told AFP the palace's announcement "will be welcomed internationally since Anwar is known as a Muslim democrat worldwide". "His biggest challenge will be to lead Malaysia out of the economic malaise following the pandemic." —AFP