

Beat: Miscellaneous

Probe into Philippines child webcam sex nets 46 arrests

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USPA News - More than 45 people around the world have been arrested as part of a two-year-long investigation into an organized crime group in the Philippines that allowed pedophiles from around the world to watch live as children as young as six were sexually abused. The preliminary results were disclosed on Thursday by the UK's National Crime Agency (NCA), based on a UK-led investigation that began in 2012 after the discovery of child pornography on computers belonging to British sex offender Timothy Ford.

The material led to the identification of associates as well as customers who paid to watch the sexual abuse of children in the Philippines. The Child Exploitation and Online Protection Center (CEOP), which took over the investigation from Northamptonshire Police, worked with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Australian Federal Police (AFP) before presenting their cases to the Philippine National Police (PNP) between August and October 2012. Later in October 2012, police in the Philippines executed three search warrants and arrested eleven people who allegedly used children to perform sex acts on webcam. Fifteen children between the ages of 6 and 15 were rescued and placed in the custody of the Philippine Department of Social Welfare and Development. Ford himself, who was planning to move to the Philippines to set up an internet cafe, was convicted in England in March 2013 and sentenced to 8.5 years in prison for paying to watch children as they were being abused on webcam. His material also led to British man Thomas Owen, who possessed nearly 4 million images of child pornography and was sentenced in July 2013 to seven years in prison. Evidence also revealed chat logs which showed Ford and Owen discussing how they could travel to the Philippines together to physically abuse children. In one chat log, Ford, who uses a wheelchair, suggested that Owen could act as his carer in the Philippines to avoid suspicion from law enforcement. As a result of the ongoing investigation, a total of 46 people have been arrested, including the 11 arrests in the Philippines and 17 arrests in the United Kingdom. Of the arrests in the United Kingdom, five people have been convicted, nine are still under investigation, two have died, and one was released without further action. Authorities estimate the British customers paid at least 5,350 pounds (\$8,745) to the criminal group. "This investigation has identified some extremely dangerous child sexual offenders who believed paying for children to be abused to order was something they could get away with," said Andy Baker, Deputy Director of the NCA's CEOP. "Being thousands of miles away makes no difference to their guilt. In my mind they are just as responsible for the abuse of these children as the contact abusers overseas." AFP Assistant Commissioner Tim Morris called the use of children in paid webcam sex sessions a "sinister development," which authorities say is driven by extreme poverty and the increasing availability of high-speed Internet that allows webcam streaming. The large number of pedophiles around the world, who are significantly more wealthy when compared to standards in the Philippines, also plays a large role. British authorities are also leading three other investigations into the live streaming of child sexual abuse and have so far identified 733 suspects, including 139 people living in the United Kingdom. Among those is Michael Eller who has been convicted and sentenced to serve 14 years in prison. In November 2013, the Dutch wing of children's rights group Terre des Hommes said it had been able to identify 1,000 people from 71 countries who allegedly used chat rooms to find young girls to perform sex acts on webcam. Of those looking for children, the organization was able to identify 999 men and 1 woman. "Webcam Child Sex Tourism (WCST) is a new phenomenon that's spreading like an epidemic," the organization said at the time. "Men from rich countries pay children in poor countries to perform sexual acts in front of webcams. These crimes happen tens of thousands of times a day." Nineteen public English-language chat rooms were used during the operation, which took place between April 17 and June 12 of last year. The researchers used information provided during the chats to search Google and social networking websites such as Facebook to uncover the real identities of the people they were talking to, and used their faces captured on cam to compare with photographs from social networking sites. "The moment that you log in and you identify yourself as a young girl from the Philippines, they swarm at you. It happens extremely fast," said one researcher, whose name was withheld. "We have men who are going online, finding these girls, virtually raping them, and then turn off their computer again and they go to work as if nothing happened." At least 254 of the alleged predators were from the United States, 110 from the United Kingdom, and 103 from India, making these the top countries of origin for adults identified during the operation. Other countries include Canada (54), Australia (46), Germany (44), Italy (22), Egypt (21), the Netherlands (20), Pakistan (20), Belgium (13), France (11), Saudi Arabia (10), Iran (10), Norway (9), Denmark (9), and Romania (6). The children's rights group handed over the files on the 1,000 alleged predators to the international police agency Interpol in early November, but it remains unclear if any have been or will be prosecuted. Only a small number of people have ever been convicted for engaging in webcam child sex tourism, despite it being illegal in nearly every country in the world. During the sting operation, which took place from a remote location in the Dutch capital of Amsterdam, the researchers would use usernames such as "10 f Philippines" to indicate they were young Filipino girls. They then waited for predators to contact them and repeated their claimed age to ensure the men or women

knew they were chatting with a child. Researchers claimed to be 12 years old in 47 cases in which the adult was identified, 10 years old in 920 cases, and 9 years old in 33 of the cases. In 290 of all cases, the researchers claimed to be accompanied by their 8-year-old sister and asked adults if they wanted her to participate in sex acts. Terre des Hommes said it received an average of 12.6 requests for conversations per hour, but researchers were only able to talk with some of them due to a lack of manpower and resources. The nature of requests varied between predators, but they most commonly asked to watch children masturbate or have sex with someone else. Other predators requested sex acts involving bondage, smoking and feces. "The children we are dealing with, they suffer from depression, they suffer from anxiety, they suffer from aggression," said Hans Guyt, director of campaigns at Terre des Hommes Netherlands. "They have no idea about normal relations, they have no idea about sexuality, and what makes it worse is that it is on the increase and therefore we have shifted our attention to the demand side. If nothing is being done about the source of the problem, this phenomenon will only increase even further."

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Editorial program service of General News Agency:

UPA United Press Agency LTD

483 Green Lanes

UK, London N13NV 4BS

contact (at) unitedpressagency.com

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