

Police arrest 150 in joint US-Europe dark web sweep



THE HAGUE: Police in Europe and the United States announced the arrest of 150 people who allegedly bought and sold significant volumes of drugs, weapons and other illegal goods on the dark web.

Europol and US authorities said they had seized tens of millions of euros in cash and virtual currencies as they rolled up an online underground trading market in the 10-month Operation Dark HunTOR. They said major dealers of counterfeit drugs, often tainted with dangerous substances like fentanyl, on the dark web had been arrested.

Most of the arrests, which took place over several months, were in the United States, with 65 people; Germany, 47; and Britain 24. Others came from Bulgaria, France, the Netherlands, Italy and Switzerland. The arrests came after a similar joint operation led by the Germans seized the largest illegal marketplace on the dark web, DarkMarket, in January. By taking over DarkMarket, authorities were able to break through the layers of

anonymity that protected traders and trace transactions to their origins.

"The point of operations such as this is to put criminals operating on the dark web on notice (that) the law enforcement community has the means and global partnerships to unmask them and hold them accountable for their illegal activities," Europol deputy director of operations Jean-Philippe Lecouffe said. US officials said in a press conference in Washington that the illegal drug trade had moved more to the dark web in the Covid-19 pandemic. They said that besides straightforward sales of illegal narcotics like cocaine, amphetamines and ecstasy, that many of the drugs being sold were purportedly common prescription drugs like Adderall, Xanax and Oxycontin but were laced with other dangerous substances like fentanyl and methamphetamine. US Deputy Attorney General Lisa Monaco said that of more than 200,000 pills seized in the US side of the operation, 90 percent contained "counterfeit opioids or other

narcotics" like extremely dangerous fentanyl.

Speaking in Washington, Lecouffe said most of those arrested were high-value targets, "among the most prolific or sensitive actors on the dark web." The US Justice Department said the US arrests included a sizable operation in Houston, Texas, that took anonymous orders online and shipped drugs to buyers around the country through the mail.

In all, the operation netted 26.7 million euros (\$31 million) in cash and virtual currencies, as well as 45 guns, and 234 kilograms (516 pounds) of drugs, mostly amphetamine, ecstasy, cocaine and opioids. In parallel to the Operation Dark HunTOR, officials said Italian police had shut down two similar underground marketplaces dubbed "DeepSea" and "Berlusconi." Together the Italian marketplaces boasted over 100,000 announcements of illegal products, said Europol, which coordinated the operation together with its twin judicial agency Euro-

Amazon, Apple weighed down by supply and chip troubles

SAN FRANCISCO: Amazon and Apple announced billions of dollars in quarterly profits on Thursday, but supply chain bottlenecks and the global chip shortage dented the tech giants, which have been riding a pandemic-stoked boom. Apple said sales of its signature iPhone and iPad were held back due to supply constraints, while Amazon struggled to get products and enough workers to meet demand.

Both firms soared in the pandemic era as people relied on their products and services, but now ripple effects that have emerged, such as lack of computer chips and spiking labor costs, are casting a shadow. Amazon reported its profit in the recently ended quarter slipped to \$3.2 billion, as the pandemic, hiring and product shortages drove up costs. The e-commerce colossus said its sales climbed to \$110.8 billion, but its profit was about half of its net income from the same quarter last year. "We've always said that when confronted with the choice between optimizing for short-term profits versus what's best for customers over the long term, we will choose the latter," said Amazon chief executive Andy Jassy, in a message explaining the company has had to spend more to do its work.

Apple on Thursday reported its profit in the recently ended quarter leapt on massive revenue that still fell short of analysts' expectations. The iPhone maker said its net income of \$20.5 billion came on revenue of \$83.4 billion, a record high for its quarter ending in September. The semiconductor drought -- caused by a mix of factors, including a surge in demand due to the Covid-19 pandemic and US-China trade tensions -- has affected industries across the globe, from tech giants to car makers.

Calling the issues facing companies a "supply chain black cloud," Wedbush analyst Dan Ives said it was effecting "every tech, auto and consumer stalwart," including Amazon. "It's not a demand issue but a supply issue that continues to be the elephant in the room for Apple and every other tech/consumer player heading into holiday season," Ives wrote in a note to investors. Apple CEO Tim Cook told an earnings call that one part of the supply problem was the chip shortage, while there were also Covid-related manufacturing disruptions in Southeast Asia.



"It is effecting pretty much all of our products," he said. Whopping profits elsewhere The results came after Microsoft, Google parent Alphabet and Facebook posted whopping profits this week, although Twitter reported a large loss due to a shareholder lawsuit settlement. Big Tech faces heightened scrutiny from antitrust regulators, especially Apple, which has appealed a major US court ruling that would force the iPhone maker to loosen the stranglehold of its online app marketplace. But the pandemic, which roared back to center stage in the United States with the Delta variant surge, has pushed demand for online services. In Amazon's case, a growing number of consumers have turned to its platform to get everything from tofu to toilet paper, and its cloud computing division also grew to help businesses and consumers stay connected.

Earlier in the week, Alphabet announced quarterly revenue of \$65.1 billion that eclipsed the same period last year by some 41 percent as the firm's online ad engine and cloud services helped yield its \$18.9 billion profit. The Silicon Valley colossus remains a centerpiece of online activity, with offerings such as its search engine, ad marketplace and YouTube video platform that give it extensive global influence. Google's results came the same day that Microsoft announced a quarterly earnings surge fueled by cloud computing demand, saying it made a profit of \$20.5 billion as revenue jumped 22 percent. The platform announced that its profit in the third quarter grew to \$9.2 billion -- a 17 percent increase -- and its ranks of users increased to 2.91 billion. Twitter, however, posted a loss in the quarter, fueled by the more than \$800 million settlement in a lawsuit alleging investors were misled about slowing user growth on the platform. —AFP

Russian hackers behind fresh US cyberattack, says Microsoft

WASHINGTON: The state-backed Russian hacking group that carried out last year's massive SolarWinds cyberattacks is behind a new and ongoing assault against US and European targets, Microsoft said. The software giant's Threat Intelligence Centre (MSTIC) said in a blog post that the Nobelium group was attempting to gain access to customers of cloud computing services and other IT service providers to infiltrate "the governments, think tanks, and other companies they serve". Describing the cyberattack as "nation-state activity", MSTIC said it "shares the hallmarks" of the assault on SolarWinds, a Texas-based software company targeted as its 300,000-strong customer base gave the hackers access to a huge number of companies. "It appears the widespread SolarWinds Russia-linked hackers from last year's attack are again on the hunt for sensitive data and stepping up supply chain attacks across the board," Wedbush analyst Dan Ives said in a note to investors. Washington imposed sanctions in April and expelled Russian diplomats in retaliation for Moscow's alleged involvement in the SolarWinds attack, as well as election interference and other hostile activity. The latest attack has been underway since at least May, MSTIC said, with Nobelium deploying a "diverse and dynamic toolkit that includes sophisticated malware". "Nobelium has been attempting to replicate the approach it has used in past attacks by targeting organizations integral to the global IT supply chain," Microsoft vice president Tom Burt wrote in a blog post published this time, Burt noted, Nobelium is targeting "resellers" — companies that customise Microsoft's cloud computing services for use by businesses and other organisations. "Since May, we have notified more than 140 resellers and technology service providers that have been targeted by Nobelium," he



Facebook spreads hate, insider tells British lawmakers

LONDON: Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen told UK lawmakers that posting content featuring anger and hate "is the easiest way to grow" on the social media platform as she urged better regulation. Haugen, who earlier this year shared a trove of internal documents alleging Facebook knew its products were harming children's mental health, argued the platform was "unquestionably" fuelling hate.

Haugen said Facebook used "engagement-based rankings" prioritising the most clicked — and invariably divisive — content. "It pushes you to the extremes and it fans hate," she told a panel of British MPs probing regulatory options, weeks after she testified to US Congress. "Anger and hate is the easiest way to grow on Facebook... bad actors have an incentive to play the algorithm, and they figure out all the ways to optimise Facebook." Haugen worked for companies including Google and Pinterest before starting at the world's largest social media platform in 2019 with the hope of helping Facebook change course.

However, the 37-year-old data scientist has said she became increasingly concerned about the choices she saw the company making and left in May. She then shared documents with US lawmakers and The Wall Street Journal that showed failures by Facebook to address misinformation, hate and other toxic content. They also alleged that it knew its products, including Instagram, were harming young girls, especially around body image. "I am deeply worried that it may not be possible to make Instagram safe for a 14-year-old and I sincerely doubt it's possible to make it safe for a 10-year-old," Haugen told the UK lawmakers. In a wide-ranging assessment of its failings, she said Facebook was failing to regulate larger groups with hundreds of thousands of users where misinformation proliferates.

Meanwhile, she said, the social media giant is also underinvesting in its non-English language products, endangering so-



cities already suffering from deep ethnic and religious divisions. "We have to care about societal harm, not just for the 'Global South' but our own societies," she said. "Facebook has been unwilling to accept even little slivers of profit being sacrificed for safety, and that's not acceptable." Haugen said a raft of up-to-date and "flexible" regulations were needed as content and social media companies evolve.

"We need ways to hold these companies accountable," she added, calling for more human intervention instead of algorithms and artificial intelligence. As part of forthcoming legislation on online safety, the UK government is considering criminal sanctions against company executives who fail to tackle harmful content on their platforms. Haugen said such sanctions could play an important role because they "act like gasoline on the law". "It makes executives take consequences more seriously," she noted. —AFP

Digital media freedom in Pakistan remains weak: Report

ISLAMABAD: The state of digital media freedom in Pakistan remained weak during 2020-21 due to regulatory pressures and threats against online expression.

At the same time, the general public was exposed to alarming levels of online disinformation, including false messages about Covid-19 origin and treatment, which put their health and safety at risk.

These were the crux of a report, 'Regulatory Repressions Amid Pandemic: State of Digital Media Freedoms in Pakistan 2021' published by the Institute for Research, Advocacy and Development (IRADA) in connection with the International Internet Day, which is observed on Oct 29.

While Pakistan showed limited gains in internet access and use during the global pandemic, the digital freedoms of media workers and internet users were threatened by the government's enforcement of controversial rules to regulate online content and its proposal for converged media regulation through a new centralised regulator, according to the report.

IRADA Executive Director Mohammad Aftab Alam said the compilation of findings and rec-

ommendations from local and global studies was intended to provide a comprehensive overview of the digital rights situation in the country. "We hope that the report will provide relevant stakeholders, including journalists, digital rights advocates, human rights defenders and policymakers, with a consolidated guide to the issues related to digital media freedoms. The report can help them develop strategies to overcome the challenges to digital rights in the country and create a progressive and safe enabling environment for digital media," he said.

The report covers five areas related to digital media freedoms — access, online freedoms, privacy, legal framework and judicial actions — in order to develop a wide-ranging understanding of the challenges faced by journalists and citizens in the effective and ethical use of online spaces.

According to the report, Pakistani journalists were consistently targeted with abuse, harassment and coordinated campaigns on social media to malign and discredit their profession during 2020-21. At the same time, the general public was exposed to alarming levels

of online disinformation, including false messages about Covid-19 origin and treatment which put their health and safety at risk. The digital divide negatively affected women, religious minorities and other marginalised groups during the pandemic even though internet connectivity and affordability showed slight signs of improvement.

"Online freedoms remained at risk in Pakistan with the country dropping to 25 points out of 100 in the freedom on the net annual report. A data protection bill being developed by the federal government remained stuck at the draft stage despite receiving recommendations from digital rights groups, the report added. The telecom regulator appeared to intensify its monitoring of social media content and took enforcement actions against social media apps on grounds of morality and decency, according to the report. The number of cyber harassment complaints filed by women also saw an increase during the pandemic. The report also highlighted court rulings that endorsed the importance of free speech and privacy in Pakistan. —The BusinessReport

