

Indian Call-Center Plot Fooled Americans Into Paying Over \$14 Million

The scammers told victims that their assets and bank accounts had been linked to drug cartels and would be seized if they didn't pay up, the authorities in India said.



By Sameer Yasir and Hari Kumar

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NEW DELHI — The police in New Delhi say they have arrested more than 50 people involved in a call-center scheme that lured victims into thinking their assets were being frozen as part of an elaborate drug investigation. The victims were convinced they had to transfer money to the scammers or risk going to jail.

According to the authorities, scammers in the plot would telephone people and tell them that their assets and bank accounts were being seized after officers from multiple law U.S. enforcement agencies found their bank account details at crime scenes involving drug cartels in Mexico and Colombia.

Over 4,500 Americans fell for it, the New Delhi police said on Wednesday, and officials estimate that more than \$14 million was transferred over two years.

Investigators said the victims would be given a choice: Either face arrest or choose an “alternative dispute resolution” option that would allow them to avoid facing the law.

“They were asked to buy Bitcoins or Google gift cards worth all the money in their accounts,” said Anyesh Roy, a police officer in New Delhi. The money was then transferred to what the victims were told was “a safe government wallet” but that actually belonged to the scammers.

Call centers are part of India's expansive outsourcing industry, which generates about \$28 billion in annual revenue and employs roughly 1.2 million people. At the same time, the country has emerged as a hot spot for online fraud in which perpetrators are rarely punished.

Cases have become so common in recent years that the Indian authorities have dedicated special units to dealing with the problem.

In August, the police in the Delhi suburb of Gurgaon raided a call center and arrested over two dozen people suspected of being involved in cheating over 30,000 Americans by putting malware onto their computers and then offering to fix them for a price.

The call center employees sent countless links to pornographic websites to people across the United States, the police said. When the links were clicked, the users' computer systems would be bugged. The scammers would then direct the users to buy iTunes gift cards or charge them up to \$700 each to debug the computers, according to the police.

The authorities have carried out raids across India and arrested hundreds of people, from boiler rooms in New Delhi, a hub of the global call-center industry, to the suburbs of Mumbai, where cons impersonating Internal Revenue Service officials have demanded payments to cover back taxes.

When the police arrived at the call center in West Delhi on Wednesday, they said, they soon realized that it was one of the biggest operations they had seen in recent months.

The scammers were trained to speak with American accents and told to read from a vetted script, the police said. One officer investigating the case said that those involved were adept at making people quickly succumb to their demands and were rewarded with extra cash.

Investigators said that the leader of the call center, an Indian man based in Dubai, had also been involved in a similar previous case but had fled the United Arab Emirates before he could be detained. They said that he had paid those working at the call center \$400 to \$500 a month and that many of his employees were teenagers.

Rakshit Tandon, a cybersecurity expert, said that Indian scammers hardly worked in isolation, and that in each case investigators typically found a sleeper partner, either in the country where the victims live or in places where data can be leaked from other parts of the world.

As India plunges into an economic crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic, Mr. Tandon said it was likely that more call-center crimes will be reported in the coming months, with a huge surge in unemployment and few jobs for educated young people.

“We have trained and cheap manpower available,” he said. “Employees know they are cheating, but they still do it for extra money.”

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