

Global sting: Secure FBI-run messaging network tricks crooks

June 8 2021, by Mike Corder and Nick Perry



In this undated photo supplied by the New Zealand police, a box containing a large amounts of cash is seen after being discovered during a police raid as part of Operation Trojan. Authorities in Australia and New Zealand Tuesday, June 8, 2021, say they've dealt a huge blow against organized crime after hundreds of criminals were tricked into using a messaging app that was being secretly run by the FBI. Credit: New Zealand Police via AP

Criminal gangs divulged plans for moving drug shipments and carrying out killings on a secure messaging system secretly run by the FBI, law enforcement agencies said Tuesday, as they unveiled a global sting operation they said dealt an "unprecedented blow" to organized crime in countries around the world.

The operation known as Trojan Shield led to police raids in 16 nations. More than 800 suspects were arrested and more than 32 tons of drugs—including cocaine, cannabis, amphetamines and methamphetamines—were seized along with 250 firearms, 55 luxury cars and more than \$148 million in cash and cryptocurrencies.

The seeds of the sting were sown in 2018 when law enforcement agencies took down a company called Phantom Secure that provided customized end-to-end encrypted devices to criminals, according to court papers. Unlike typical cell phones, the devices don't make phone calls or browse the internet—but allow for secure messaging. As an outgrowth of the operation, the FBI also recruited a collaborator who was developing a next-generation secure-messaging platform for the criminal underworld called ANOM. The collaborator engineered the system to give the agency access to any messages being sent.

ANOM didn't take off immediately. But once other secure platforms used by criminal gangs to organize drug trafficking underworld hits and money laundering were taken down by police, chiefly EncroChat and Sky ECC, gangs were in the market for a new one and the FBI's platform was ready. Over the past 18 months, the agency provided phones via unsuspecting middlemen to more than 300 gangs operating in more than 100 countries.



Law enforcement officials walk past an Operation Trojan Shield logo at a news conference, Tuesday, June 8, 2021, in San Diego. The global sting operation involved an encrypted communications platform developed by the FBI and has sparked a series of raids and arrests around the world in which more than 800 suspects were arrested and more than 32 tons of drugs—cocaine, cannabis, amphetamines and methamphetamines were seized. Credit: AP Photo/Denis Poroy

Intelligence gathered and analyzed "enabled us to prevent murders. It led to the seizure of drugs that led to the seizure of weapons. And it helped prevent a number of crimes," Calvin Shivers, assistant director of the FBI's Criminal Investigative Division, told a news conference in The Hague, Netherlands.

The operation—led by the FBI with the involvement of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, the European Union police agency Europol and law enforcement agencies in several countries—dealt "an unprecedented blow to criminal networks, and this is worldwide," said Dutch National Police Chief Constable Jannine van den Berg.

Australian Federal Police Commander Jennifer Hearst called it "a watershed moment in global law enforcement history."

The ANOM app became popular in criminal circles as users told one another it was a safe platform. All the time, police were looking over the shoulders of criminals as they discussed hits, drug shipments and other crimes.



Acting U.S Attorney Randy Grossman, right, speaks as law enforcement officials look on during a news conference announcing Operation Trojan shield, Tuesday, June 8, 2021, in San Diego. The global sting operation involved an encrypted communications platform developed by the FBI and has sparked a series of raids and arrests around the world in which more than 800 suspects were arrested and more than 32 tons of drugs—cocaine, cannabis, amphetamines and methamphetamines were seized. Credit: AP Photo/Denis Poroy

"There was a void that was created by a lack of these encrypted platforms," Shivers said, of the initial move to take down apps previously used by gangs. "So that created an opportunity for collaboration with our international partners, to not only develop the specific tool but also to develop the process of gathering the intelligence and disseminating the intelligence."

The FBI collaborator effectively created a "blind copy" channel so that every single message sent by ANOM users ended up on a server run by the agency, court documents say.

Since October 2019, the FBI has has cataloged more than 20 million messages from a total of 11,800 devices—with about 9,000 currently active, according to the documents, which cited Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Australia and Serbia as the most active countries.



Acting U.S. Attorney Randy Grossman speaks at a news conference announcing Operation Trojan shield, Tuesday, June 8, 2021, in San Diego. The global sting operation involved an encrypted communications platform developed by the FBI and has sparked a series of raids and arrests around the world in which more than 800 suspects were arrested and more than 32 tons of drugs—cocaine, cannabis, amphetamines and methamphetamines were seized. Credit: AP Photo/Denis Poroy

They say the number of active ANOM users was only 3,000 until Sky, one of the platforms previously used by criminal gangs, was dismantled in March.

While primarily used in drug trafficking and money-laundering, an FBI agent quoted in the documents says "high-level public corruption cases

(also were) initiated as a result." The agent said a goal of Trojan Shield was to "shake the confidence in this entire industry because the FBI is willing and able to enter this space and monitor messages."

Law enforcement agencies from Sweden to New Zealand described the operation as having a significant impact.

Swedish police prevented a dozen planned killings and believe that they have arrested several "leading actors in criminal networks," according to a statement from Linda Staaf, the head of Sweden's national criminal intelligence unit.



New Zealand police National Organized Crime Group Director, Detective Superintendent Greg Williams addresses the media on Operation Trojan at the

Auckland Central Police headquarters, in New Zealand, Tuesday, June 8, 2021. Authorities in Australia and New Zealand said Tuesday that they've dealt a huge blow against organized crime after hundreds of criminals were tricked into using a messaging app that was being secretly run by the FBI. Credit: Jed Bradley/NZ Herald via AP

Finnish police said Tuesday that nearly 100 people have been detained and more than 500 kilograms (half a ton) of drugs confiscated, along with dozens of guns and cash worth hundreds of thousands of euros (dollars). In Germany, the general prosecutor's office in Frankfurt said that more than 70 people were arrested Monday and drugs, cash and weapons were also seized.

In Australia, authorities said they arrested 224 people and seized more than four tons of drugs and \$35 million. New Zealand police said they had arrested 35 people and seized drugs and assets worth millions of dollars.

"Today, the Australian government, as part of a global operation, has struck a heavy blow against organized crime," Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison told reporters. "Not just in this country, but one that will echo around organized crime around the world."



In this undated photo supplied by the New Zealand police, a bag of marijuana is displayed during a police raid as part of Operation Trojan. Authorities in Australia and New Zealand said Tuesday, June 8, 2021, they've dealt a huge blow to organized crime after hundreds of criminals were tricked into using a messaging app that was being secretly run by the FBI. Credit: New Zealand Police via AP



In this undated photo supplied by the New Zealand police, a large amount of cash is displayed during a police raid as part of Operation Trojan. Authorities in Australia and New Zealand said Tuesday, June 8, 2021, they've dealt a huge blow

to organized crime after hundreds of criminals were tricked into using a messaging app that was being secretly run by the FBI. Credit: New Zealand Police via AP

European police last year delivered a major blow to organized crime after cracking an encrypted communications network, known as EncroChat, used by criminal gangs across the continent.

In March, Belgian police arrested dozens of people after cracking another encrypted chat system and seizing more than 17 tons of cocaine.

The latest operation went even further.

"The success of Operation Trojan Shield is a result of tremendous innovation, dedication and unprecedented international collaboration," Shivers said. "And the results are staggering."

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