

Beat: News

17 arrested, 400 Tor sites seized in operation targeting `darknet markets`

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USPA News - Authorities in Europe and the United States have arrested 17 people and seized more than 400 sites in a coordinated action against markets offering weapons and drugs through anonymity network Tor, officials announced on Friday, just a day after a major drugs market was taken down. The latest operation took place on Thursday when authorities in the United States and more than a dozen European countries executed 13 search warrants and arrested 17 people after an investigation into darknet marketplaces.

On these marketplaces, which can only be accessed through Tor, people can purchase weapons, drugs and even contract killers. Ulf Bergstr  m, a spokesman for Eurojust, the European Union's judicial cooperation unit, said 414 hidden sites were seized during Thursday's operation, which was dubbed Operation Onymous. Also seized was hardware, digital media, drugs, gold, silver, 180,000 euros (\$223,500) in cash, and Bitcoins worth approximately 1 million U.S. dollars. "Users, vendors and those hosting these hidden services were - until now - believed to be relatively safe from prosecution. This action will shake that belief," Bergstr  m said. He said several vendors and administrators were arrested during the operation, but there was no immediate word on whether any users of Tor sites had been identified. Sites seized during the operation include "Pandora," "Blue Sky," "Hydra," and "Cloud Nine," all of which offered an extensive range of illegal goods and services for sale, including drugs, stolen credit card data, counterfeit currency, and fake identity documents. Also seized was "Executive Outcomes," which specialized in firearm trafficking, and "Super Notes Counter," which offered to sell counterfeit euros and U.S. dollars in exchange for Bitcoin. Countries involved in `Operation Onymous` include Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Romania, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Thursday's operation came just a day after 26-year-old Blake Benthall, who is known as `Defcon` online, was arrested in San Fransisco for allegedly running the hidden site `Silk Road 2.0`, which was launched in November 2013 after its predecessor was shut down by law enforcement. Benthall's site is alleged to have enabled more than 100,000 people to buy and sell illegal drugs. "Underground websites such as Silk Road and Silk Road 2 are like the Wild West of the Internet, where criminals can anonymously buy and sell all things illegal," said Peter Edge, of Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) at the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). "We will continue to use all of our resources and work closely with our U.S. and international law enforcement partners to shut down these hidden black market sites, and hold criminals accountable who use anonymous Internet software to peddle their illegal activities." Tor, which is an acronym for the Onion Router, is a network designed to hide users' real IP address by routing all traffic through the many servers of the Tor network, making it practically impossible to physically locate the computers hosting or accessing the sites. Although Tor is also used for legitimate purposes, criminals take advantage of Tor for a range of illicit purposes, including drugs, weapons, money laundering, and child pornography.

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