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NEWS

U.S. teams with Italy to fight cyber crime

By Philip Willan

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The head of the U.S. Secret Service on Tuesday signed a memorandum of understanding with the head of the Italian police and the chief executive officer of the Italian Postal Service to set up an international task force to combat cyber crime.

The European Electronic Crime Task Force -- not to be confused with the private study group of the same name that began operating in 2003 -- will tackle identity theft, hacking and other computer-based crime from a headquarters in Rome, Italian officials said. The initiative will be open to contributions from other European countries, private IT operators and academic institutions, the Italian police said in a prepared statement.

"This is not a borderless crime and we believe there needs to be a reaction at an international level. We'll provide all our resources to make that happen," Mark Sullivan, the director of the U.S. Secret Service, said after signing the accord at a ceremony at the Italian interior ministry.

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Antonio Manganelli, the head of the Italian police, said the U.S. Secret Service and the Italian Postal Service were natural choices as partners in the initiative, given their specific relevant experiences. "This was a natural choice, given

the global nature of the sector and the particular vocation of the Secret Service to deal with certain problems," Manganelli told reporters. The Secret Service has been combating fraud since its foundation in 1865. The Postal Service delivered services online to millions of customers and was experienced in defending its network against cyber attacks, the police chief added.

Massimo Sarmi, the CEO of the Italian Postal Service, said the new task force would be open to contributions from outside Europe as well. "We provide our services to more than 20 million customers and we are able to monitor in real time that operations are proceeding normally, and not turning into criminal events," Sarmi said.

"This morning we detected seven phishing attacks from various parts of the world. If the criminals had been allowed enough time, our clients might have become victims of fraud," Sarmi said. The Postal Service CEO said the quickest online thief he had encountered was able to start withdrawing funds just 39 seconds after a successful identity theft.

"We will exchange information and alerts with the Secret Service to prevent this type of event before it happens," Sarmi said.

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The Postal Service now makes more money from banking and insurance services than it does from delivering traditional post and has developed a sophisticated system for monitoring its electronic network. Its Services and Systems Control Room monitors the activities of 14,000 post offices, 5,000 cash dispensers, 70,000 work stations and 18,000 servers, through which more than 20 million transactions are carried out every day, the company says.

But Sarmi said there would be no question of the Postal Service's technology being applied to violate the privacy of other networks. "We will be cooperating with two primary security institutions that have the instruments to act in full respect for privacy," Sarmi said.

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