

LockBit hackers' swagger on display after police leak identities online

WASHINGTON/LONDON — One of the world's biggest criminal hacking gangs woke up on Tuesday to a startling discovery: Law enforcement, after taking over their main website on Monday, were now threatening to reveal their personal details and data about their cybercrime organization.

The group, LockBit, had become notorious in cybercrime circles for using malicious software called ransomware to digitally extort victims, relying on underground marketing campaigns to boost its profile. At one point, LockBit had promised \$1,000 to anyone who tattooed their logo on themselves, according to cybersecurity researchers.

The group's ringleader, known by the online moniker "LockbitSupp," had also become so confident in their own anonymity that, according to Britain's National Crime Agency (NCA), they had promised \$10 million to the first person who could find and unmask them.

The international law enforcement operation, which had posted on the extortion website on Monday that it had taken control, on Tuesday announced it had re-engineered LockBit's core online system — mimicking the countdown clock that LockBit used in extortion attempts and posing its own \$10 million challenge, according to a review of LockBit's darkweb site.

The core online system was reengineered to target the hackers in the same way they had terrorized victims: with an advent calendar-like series of tiles, each marked with a countdown timer that, upon reaching zero, published stolen data.

Across the website's front page, where victim names once stood, law enforce-

ment agencies replaced the text and links with internal data obtained by hacking the hackers themselves.

The resulting display was a smorgasbord of law enforcement action against LockBit which included indictments, sanctions, a tool with which victims can decrypt their data, and a new countdown with two days left on the clock which asked: "Who is LockbitSupp? The \$10 million question."

Before it was taken down, LockBit's website had displayed an ever-growing gallery of victim organizations that was updated nearly daily. Next to the names were digital clocks showing the number of days left to the deadline given to each organization to provide ransom payment.

The unique law enforcement operation was the result of a years-long investigation by international police agencies and was designed to undermine the group's credibility in the criminal underground, officials said.

"LockBit's affiliates should be very concerned right now, especially as law enforcement continues to make decryptors available to victims," said Charles Carmakal, Mandiant Consulting's chief technology officer.

The United States has charged two Russian nationals with deploying LockBit ransomware against companies and groups around the world. Police in Poland and Ukraine made two arrests.

Before it was seized by police, LockBit was able to extort multiple hacking victims at the same time through its website, which listed breached companies next to the countdown timer. — Reuters

AI use regulations should evolve along with technology — experts

By Justine Irish D. Tabile
Reporter

REGULATIONS on artificial intelligence (AI) should be "flexible and mature" to consider the continuous evolution of the technology, according to officials of universities.

R.F. Shangraw, Jr., president of Cintana Education and a faculty member at Arizona State University (ASU), said AI technology will continue to evolve, and thus will require changing regulations.

"I think it's important that those regulations be flexible and mature as the technology matures," Mr. Shangraw said in a roundtable discussion on Wednesday.

He said things on the ground change fast, noting how universities previously banned the use of ChatGPT but now allow it within specific perimeters.

"[AI] is going to be evolving. Just like any other technology, it is going to evolve. And I don't think we can get set on a fixed set of regulations that will last forever," Mr. Shangraw said.

"I think you are going to have to constantly review those policies and a constant review by the faculty and other members," he added.

According to Mr. Shangraw, ASU has a governing board composed of faculty and administrators that reviews policies weekly because things are rapidly changing.

"I think that policies need to be put in place now, and I think there are some frameworks that are out there... but I think the worst thing you can do is not have a framework at all," he added.

Cintana is ASU's global implementation partner that handles ASU's plans to work outside the US and makes sure that the university's programs and activities are well coordinated.

Mapúa University, ASU's exclusive partner in the Philippines, also has a governing body working on their policy on the use of AI.

"Just recently, we finalized our academic policy on the use of AI, and in fact, we are fine-tuning it. We are also creating a policy for the whole conglomerate (iPeople, Inc.)," said Dodjie S. Maestrecampo, president and chief executive officer of Mapúa.



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Mapúa's governing body is currently composed of its academic council, and the school is targeting to involve other groups such as students, administration, teachers, and personnel.

"[AI] will continually evolve, and I think that is the reason why we cannot finalize it (rules) because we are trying to actually have a final version of it. So, I think we should just have a living document that we can continuously upgrade as [AI] evolves," he added.

Mr. Maestrecampo said the establishment of policies will help in harnessing the benefits of AI in a responsible way.

"We have to do this. We have to define policies — the dos and

don'ts — for the use of AI. And I think that is the first step to make sure that this will be an innovation that is centered around principles and around the proper use of this technology," he said.

Amid calls for AI regulation, Mr. Shangraw said the government must converse with stakeholders.

"I think out of those conversations will come a set of broad parameters around how to coexist with AI," he said.

"It is a challenge because you don't want too many regulations in place that stymie innovation in the field, and on the other hand, you don't want technology to work in ways that are detrimental to the general public," he added.

Atome partners with Mastercard for game credits offer

ATOME Philippines has partnered with Mastercard to allow its cardholders to convert their rewards points into gaming credits via the Mastercard Gamer Xchange (MGX) platform.

"We've seen a very strong take-up for the Atome Card, especially among digital-native Gen Z and millennial users in the Philippines, with one of the top use cases for the Atome Card being online purchases. We see a strong synergy in this partnership with Mastercard's MGX platform as it provides Atome Card holders and gamers access to a wide range of gaming credit options," Atome Cards Business Head Magic Tang said in a statement on Tuesday.

As part of the offer, gamers in the Philippines can convert their Atome Card rewards

points into gaming credits across nearly 4,000 game titles via turnkey solution MGX.

Atome cardholders can obtain up to P2,000 worth of gaming credits when they shop using the recently upgraded Atome Card. The offer is available until March.

"MGX bridges the world of rewards to the thriving global gaming community, offering an innovative and seamless redemption solution in a new category. From eSports viewers to console and smartphone gaming enthusiasts across a range of demographics, it opens new connections to the world's fastest expanding entertainment market," Mastercard Consumer Marketing & Sponsorships Senior Vice-President Kaveri Khullar said.

"As the Philippines gaming market anticipates further growth in the next few years, this partnership with Atome is a fantastic example of how innovative payment experiences are evolving to connect consumers to their passions," she added.

The new Atome Card allows users to shop using buy now, pay later anywhere a Mastercard card is accepted. Cardholders may pay in three or six months.

The Digital 2024 report of consumer intelligence firm Meltwater and creative agency We Are Social showed the Philippines placed second (95.9%) to Indonesia (96.5%) when it comes to video game consumption on any device. — AMCS

Bill reducing stock transaction tax approved by House plenary

THE House of Representatives approved on Wednesday a bill seeking to reduce the tax on stock transactions to 0.1% from 0.6% currently.

Legislators during the plenary session approved House Bill No. 9277, or the proposed Capital Markets Efficiency Promotion Act, through voice vote.

Reducing the tax on stock transaction is expected to improve the competitiveness of the Philippine stock market within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), according to bill sponsor and Party-list Rep. Ray T. Reyes.

"If we look at the cost of capital in Philippines and also in our taxes on capital markets, we are the ones with the highest stock transaction tax," he said during interpellation on Tuesday.

Mr. Reyes said that the Philippines is the second to the last in the ASEAN-6 in terms of market capitalization, and is at risk of being overtaken by Vietnam.

Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam have a 0.1% tax on stock transactions, while Thailand imposes a 0.11% tax.

He estimates foregone revenue at P2.5 billion once the measure passes into law.

On Wednesday, the plenary approved an amendment by Cagayan De Oro Rep. Rufus B. Rodriguez proposing documentary stamp tax (DST) exemptions for insurance policies covering property damage inflicted by natural disasters if the insurance cover is below P100,000.

A P20 DST would apply for insurance cover of up to P300,000, and a P150 DST would be imposed on coverage of up to P1 million.

The proposed law also seeks to lower the dividends tax rate for non-resident investors to 10% from the current 25%, as well as remove the 7% gross receipts tax on net trading gains by banks and financial institutions. — Beatriz Marie D. Cruz

Biotech products to be tested against mango pest, DA says

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) said it will test products of a US biotechnology company to address the Cecid Fly infestation on the mango crop.

In a statement on Wednesday, Agriculture Secretary Francisco P. Tiu Laurel, Jr. said the potential supplier is Sun & Earth Microbiology LLC.

"The flies destroy up to 80% of mango fruits, with those affected showing brown scab-like spots. These pests usually start infesting mango trees shortly after flowering," he said.

The Philippines exported 12,548 metric tons of mangoes in 2023, according to the Bureau of Plant Industry. The shipments were valued at P2.9 billion.

The company will use its product to combat the flies in Palawan, where 100,000 hectares planted to mango have been hit by the infestation.

"Sun & Earth plans to use biological microbes that had been successfully tested against the insects in Venezuela, Columbia and Vietnam," the DA added.

Additionally, Mr. Laurel said he also plans to explore the use of Sun & Earth products against the fusarium wilt disease affecting the banana, abaca and coconut crops, which are "all major agricultural exports of the Philippines."

Fusarium wilt is a soil-borne fungal disease that blocks the banana plant's vascular system and deprives it of minerals, nutrients, and moisture. Affected plants turn yellow and die.

The TR4 strain of fusarium wilt was first detected in Davao City in 2009 and continues to threaten the Cavendish banana crop, which is the main variety of exportable banana.

Banana exports were estimated to decline by 2.9% to 2.21 million MT in 2023, according to the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization.

The DA is also planning to tap the company's products to deal with insects affecting rice.

It added that Agriculture Undersecretary Roger V. Navarro will lead discussions with the Food and Drug Administration to grant Sun & Earth the necessary clearances to deploy its products. — Adrian H. Halili

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Michael Gerard D. Enriquez
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Sun Life Investment Management
and Trust Corp (SLIMTC)



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