

US-EU counterfeit crackdown seizes 132 websites

WASHINGTON: US and European authorities said on Monday, 26 November 2012, they seized 132 websites in a transatlantic law enforcement crackdown on online sellers of counterfeit merchandise.

The seizure was the latest in a string of efforts by US officials to shut down online forgers, but the first joint effort with EU officials.

Monday's announcement was the result of a joint probe by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) with authorities from Britain, Belgium, Denmark, France, Romania and the European Police Office (EUROPOL), according to a statement released in Washington.

ICE Director John Morton said the sites were selling a wide range of illegally copied products including Nike apparel, Ergobaby carriers and Hermes luxury goods, "all of it fake, all of its substandard quality."

"These websites were stealing from legitimate websites and copyright holders and the people who make these products," Morton told a conference call.

Morton said the operation coincided with "Cyber Monday," a major online shopping day following the Thanksgiving Day holiday in the United States.

"This operation is a great example of the tremendous cooperation between ICE and our international partners," said Morton.

"It's a huge problem not only for US industry, but for legitimate industries in Europe and Asia and elsewhere. Just think of all the jobs that are lost, think of all the tax revenues that are lost."

Among the brands being counterfeited were McAfee, Symantec, Armani, Guess, Burberry, Chanel, Gucci, Lacoste, Dior, Tommy Hilfiger, Versace, YSL and Michael Kors, officials said.

The domains seized were not only .com websites, but those ending in .eu, .be, .dk, .fr, .ro and .uk.

The netted domain names are now in the custody of the governments, which have placed banners notifying visitors of the seizure.

Rob Wainwright, director of Europol, said in the statement that the counterfeiting "is not a harmless and victimless crime. It can cause serious health and safety risks and it undermines our economy."

US officials have been using this procedure for several years in anti-counterfeiting operations, but rights groups including the American Civil Liberties Union have complained that the actions amount to unconstitutional seizures without due process.

In August, three members of Congress sent a letter to federal officials questioning the seizure process.

"If a website's domain is seized, it needs to be given meaningful due process that comports with the US constitution and US law," said a letter from Representatives Zoe Lofgren, Jared Polis and Jason Chaffetz to the departments of Justice and Homeland Security.

"To do otherwise risks unjustly suppressing lawful free speech and devastating legitimate businesses."

The latest seizure brought the number of websites seized since 2010 to 1,630, according to ICE.

In addition to the domain name seizures, officials said they were seeking to seize \$175,000 in PayPal accounts utilized by the infringing websites in the latest operation.

Officials said the latest operation, part of a project called Operation In Our Sites seized 101 websites and yielded one arrest in the United States. In Europe, according to the statement, 31 domain names were seized.

Source: AFP

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