

# AFP successfully combats child sex exploitation



**A nationally coordinated approach to counter the borderless crime of online child sexual exploitation has resulted in scores of arrests across Australia.**

The AFP, in collaboration with national and international partners, has successfully identified and charged offenders with online child sexual exploitation. Millions of images of child exploitation material have been seized and complex online child abuse file and video-sharing networks have been dismantled as a result.

The internet is a powerful global tool that is drawing the world closer together. Offenders believe that they have the power of anonymity, so predators from all walks of life engage in illegal activities thinking that these activities cannot be traced. The lack of geographical and physical boundaries on the internet means that any problem on the internet, such as online child sexual exploitation, must be tackled globally.

Over the past 12 months, AFP work in this crime type resulted in more than 300 people charged and a number of children identified as at risk were removed from their homes.

## Operation Thuja

**Operation Thuja began in February 2007 as a joint investigation by the AFP and NSW Police into the activities of several people associated with a very sophisticated and complex Australian online paedophile network.**

The primary target was identified as a former NSW police officer alleged to be the leader of the network which met regularly, shared child exploitation material via the internet and conversed about the procuring and grooming of young boys.

The former police officer was targeted using NSW Police electronic surveillance and three covert operatives. One of the covert operatives took part in several face-to-face meetings and was subsequently introduced to five active paedophiles located in regional NSW. A further two covert operatives acted as 14-year-old children to engage the target online.

Electronic and physical surveillance undertaken by the AFP and NSW Police identified 13 domestic targets and 96 international offenders.

The information gathered led the AFP and NSW Police, together with officers from the Queensland Police Service and Western Australia Police, to execute 10 search warrants across Australia between August and December 2007.

Team Leader Child Protection Operations Melissa Northam said the operation helped to dismantle an extremely sophisticated and complex network of paedophiles.

“Through the internet we are seeing highly organised and sophisticated groups of individuals operating in a global environment without having to leave their homes,” Federal Agent Northam said.

“We are moving our focus from collectors to networks. Operation Thuja has bought law enforcement together with an increased focus on children both domestically and abroad.”

Parents across Australia are being urged to learn about the internet and, in particular, ways to protect their children from cyber predators.

“Offenders are becoming more computer savvy on how they collect and distribute material in their attempts to evade law enforcement detection,” Federal Agent Northam said.



## Operation Irenic

**In August 2007, the AFP received a referral from Interpol Vienna alleging that 44 suspects believed to be living in Australia had downloaded child exploitation material from four Austrian websites.**

Three months later, after gathering intelligence information, teams from AFP offices across Australia began investigating the alleged offenders. Between November and December 2007, the then Online Child Sexual Exploitation Team (OCSET) and its State and Territory counterparts executed 41 search warrants across Queensland, NSW, South Australia, Western Australia, Tasmania and Victoria.

More than one million images of child exploitation material which had been either stored or downloaded onto CDs, mobile phones, computers, external hard drives, videos and documents were uncovered as a result of these warrants.

Former National Coordinator Child Protection Operations Reece Kershaw said the AFP's objective is to create a hostile environment to prevent people from accessing, publishing, producing and trading in child exploitation material.

"We are expanding our numbers in prevention, innovation, education and awareness programs," Federal Agent Kershaw said.

"This includes the crime prevention team which encompasses internet policing. We have had to improve our response two-fold. Offenders are using surveillance on the net to anticipate our actions and see what we come up with next.

"We are now investing more resources into this crime type and managing more proactive operations, increasingly with our State and Territory police partners through the Australia New Zealand Policing Advisory Agency Child Protection Committee."

During this investigation 24 people were arrested or summonsed and charged with offences pursuant to using a carriage service to access material, and with possessing and using child pornography.

"Our success can be contributed to the dedication, commitment and upskilling of investigators in the tactical use of the internet, social networking technologies such as MySpace, Facebook, online chat rooms and advanced interviewing techniques," Federal Agent Kershaw said.

"A strong referral and prioritisation system is crucial in effectively targeting offenders as many have had no previous record for this type of illegal activity."

More than 100 police were involved in the investigation. Those arrested were between 30 and 70 years of age and included a forensic psychologist, a school teacher, unemployed people and a former police officer.



## Operation Centurion

**In mid 2008, the AFP began Operation Centurion – one of the largest investigations ever conducted into online child abuse since the Federal Parliament enacted legislation in 2005 to allow the prosecution of child sex offences under Commonwealth law.**

The AFP, as part of an investigation spanning 170 countries, received a referral from Interpol in late 2007 in relation to a website containing images believed to be child abuse material. Within 76 hours the website received 12 million hits from 144,285 different Internet Protocol (IP) addresses. The website was accessed by 2883 Australian individual IP addresses, and from these IP addresses 1517 alleged offenders were identified.

The AFP's Child Protection Operations (CPO) teams, formerly known as OCSET, together with State and Territory partners, set about the task of executing warrants across all states during a month of coordinated action in May 2008.

The CPO teams executed 104 search warrants and arrested 59 persons including school teachers, a police officer, public servants, accountants and IT specialists.

To date, 333 warrants have been executed nationally, and 136 people have been arrested. Four children considered to be at risk were removed from harm during this investigation. More than 400,000 images were seized during Operation Centurion with one seizure alone totalling 100,000 images.

## Operation Resistance

**Operation Resistance was based on international collaboration which began as the result of a referral received through the AFP's International Network from the Brazilian Federal Police in December 2007.**

Referrals from the Brazilian Federal Police via Interpol have led to the identification of more than 200 possible offenders in 70 countries around the globe.

The information assisted police to conduct a 12-month investigation that identified a number of alleged offenders sharing videos and images depicting child sexual abuse on the internet.

The AFP executed 28 search warrants resulting in 19 arrests across NSW, Victoria and Queensland. The AFP's CPO teams seized more than 15,000 videos and 500,000 images of child exploitation material which were shared between members of a peer-to-peer network.

The images and videos included the sexual abuse of children, some as young as 12 months old.

AFP Acting Deputy Commissioner Andrew Colvin said this operation removed at least two children from harm and warned that the AFP would not tolerate this type of illegal activity.

"The videos seized as part of this operation have to be among the worst we have seen," Deputy Commissioner Colvin said.

"The viewing and exchanging of child exploitation material will not be tolerated in Australia and the AFP, with its State, Territory and international counterparts, will continue to fight this repulsive crime."

Operation Resistance, like many other operations, highlights the importance of international collaboration for this borderless crime.

## Keeping our children safe

**Acting National Manager High Tech Crime Operations Neil Gaughan said the AFP's commitment to online child protection has been supported by the Federal government through the funding of its \$126.5 million Plan for Cyber Safety initiative from 2008 to 2012. In addition, government funding of \$49 million will enable the AFP Child Protection Operations Team to expand its capacity to fight and prevent online child abuse.**

Online chat rooms and social networking sites have proven to be dangerous destinations for children, especially those who are unsupervised. Predators are aware of the latest music, hobbies and interests. Some try to lower a child's inhibitions by slowly introducing sexual context and content into their conversations, while others immediately engage in sexually-explicit conversation.

Due to the borderless nature of the internet, the unwanted contact or harassment can occur from anywhere in the world. However the recent successes of operations Thuja, Irenic, Centurion and Resistance prove that the internet is no longer an anonymous place in which internet predators can engage in illegal activities without the fear of being caught. They also highlight the AFP's capacity to dismantle networks of this type and its ability to pursue offenders off-shore through the AFP's International Network and its relationships with foreign law enforcement agencies, including members of the Virtual Global Taskforce.

