Beat: Local

UK warns of ransomware targeting `tens of millions`

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USPA News - Malware that restricts access to the computer system it infects and demands a ransom is targeting `tens of millions` of people in the United Kingdom as part of a mass e-mail spamming event, British authorities warned on Friday, calling it a "significant risk." The e-mails which have been sent out to tens of millions of people in the United Kingdom appear to be from banks and other financial institutions, according to the UK`s National Crime Agency (NCA).

It said the mass e-mail spamming was continuing on Friday and appears to target small and medium-sized businesses in particular. The agency said the e-mails carry an attachment that appears to be correspondence linked to the subject of the message, such as a voicemail, fax, details of a suspicious transaction or invoices for payment. When the attachment is opened, it installs the Trojan horse malware known as Cryptolocker and encrypts files on the infected machine and the local network it is connected with. Once encrypted, the computer displays a splash screen with a countdown timer and a demand for the payment of 2 Bitcoins, which are worth approximately $922 as of Saturday. But the NCA said it does never endorse the payment of a ransom to criminals and there is no guarantee that they would honor the payments in any event. "The NCA are actively pursuing organised crime groups committing this type of crime," said Lee Miles, Deputy Head of the NCCU. "We are working in cooperation with industry and international partners to identify and bring to justice those responsible and reduce the risk to the public." Late last month, Dutch police issued a warning after hundreds of people in the Netherlands became the victim of a new version of police-themed ransomware. The malware locks the computer and displays a screen purporting to be from Dutch police, advising them that illegal content was discovered on their computer and ordering the user to pay a `fine.` Different from previous variants of the police-themed ransomware, the new virus displays actual images of child pornography and falsely claims they were found on the computer. "With this child porn-variant of ransomware, the criminals play in on the shame of computer users," said Dutch police official Wilbert Paulissen, who noted that officers would never pursue suspects in such a way. "Making payments makes no difference, the computer will not be unlocked," Paulissen warned last month. He also assured victims of the virus that officers can distinguish between child pornography that was intentionally downloaded and illegal content that came as part of ransomware.

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