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FRAUD

F.B.I. Warns of Internet Frauds That Capitalize on Tsunami

By TOM ZELLER Jr.

WASHINGTON, Jan. 5 - The F.B.I. issued a warning on Wednesday about online frauds that try to capitalize on the Indian Ocean tsunami disaster.

The schemes, which have been reported to the bureau's Internet Crime Complaint Center over the past week, have included unsolicited e-mail messages seeking money and a phony tsunami relief Web site capable of depositing a virus on the computers of people who visit it.

In other instances, families who have posted messages and e-mail addresses on the Web as part of their search for missing relatives have been contacted by rogue brokers offering to help them - for a fee.

The bureau said it would aggressively pursue "those who would attempt to victimize philanthropic individuals."

Some of the solicitations bear a striking resemblance to variations on a widely circulated e-mail swindle often associated with Nigeria.

In those e-mail messages, recipients are often asked to help Nigerian "dignitaries" regain large sums of money that have been misappropriated by the government. In return for bank account data, Social Security numbers and other personal information, recipients of such e-mail messages are told they will receive a percentage of the money. One Tsunami variation now in circulation comes from Miss Helen, princess of Somalia, whose "entire village" - and all of her relatives - were "wiped away by this terrible flood." Miss Helen claims to need help transferring her family's fortune - about \$2.4 million, the e-mail message says - which was sent to Spain just before the tsunami. A 40 percent commission is promised to people who help. The Internet Crime Complaint Center estimates that \$125.6 million was lost in 2004 to online swindles, with auction fraud accounting for about 61 percent of all complaints. The Nigerian e-mail scam ranked among the top 10 scams reported to the agency.

Audri Lanford, co-editor of [ScamBusters.org](#), one of the oldest and most comprehensive online clearinghouses for information about Internet fraud, said she was not surprised by the quick exploitation of the tsunami.

"Within hours of 9/11 we had the 9/11 scams," Ms. Lanford said. "We've seen them for every major disaster."

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