

Germany Says It Uncovered Huge Child Pornography Ring

By RICHARD BERNSTEIN

BERLIN, Sept. 26 — Law enforcement officials in Germany said today that an international police investigation had uncovered an immense child pornography ring involving some 26,500 suspects who swapped illegal images on the Internet in 166 countries.

About 1,500 police officers searched more than 500 homes throughout Germany this week, seizing computers, videotapes, compact discs and diskettes, the officials said. The Germans have also supplied other countries with information on child pornography suspects, including about 800 people in the United States, the officials said.

"One of the biggest internationally active networks has been smashed," said Curt Becker, the justice minister for the eastern German state of Saxony-Anhalt.

The state's Interior and Justice Ministries said in a statement that the raids carried out this week followed an investigation of several months involving cooperation with Interpol and police forces of other countries.

Richard Beer, a spokesman for the

state crime office of Saxony-Anhalt, said a team of F.B.I. investigators had come to the state capital, Magdeburg, in May and were briefed on the investigation by the German police.

In Switzerland, a spokesman for the federal police said that eight people had been charged so far and that dozens of arrests were likely to follow. There was no information on arrests or prosecutions of people in other countries.

Mr. Beer said the investigation stemmed from a case in Magdeburg more than a year ago, in which the police raided the home of a man suspected of having started several Internet groups that swapped child pornography images.

"We started our investigation of the child porn ring last year in August and soon realized that it was a big thing," Mr. Beer said. "By now we know that this is the biggest case of child pornography we have ever disclosed in Germany."

The police obtained some 38,000 e-mail addresses and thousands of illegal images when a court in the eastern German city of Halle required an Internet service provider to turn over material on 1,000 suspects,

Agence France-Presse reported.

"According to the information we now have, many of the suspects are extremely dangerous pedophiles and are from all walks of life," the Interior and Justice Ministries statement said.

The raids in Germany alone uncovered 38 Internet groups that swapped child pornography images. The police said they confiscated 745 computers, 5,800 videotapes, 35,500 CD-ROM's and 8,300 diskettes.

Among those suspected of possessing or exchanging child pornography are police officials and "many teachers and educators," said Jürgen Konrad, the attorney general of Saxony-Anhalt.

In Germany, distributing child pornography carries a prison term of three months to five years, while possessing it carries a maximum one-year penalty. In contrast to the United States, where depictions of sexual acts by anyone under 18 is considered child pornography, in Germany, the age is 14.

The announcement by the German police today was reminiscent of a case two years ago in the United States in which federal authorities

carried out searches in 37 states after a Texas company, Landslide Productions, was found to offer customers access to foreign Web sites showing children performing sexual acts with adults or other children. The police said that 100 people were arrested in the raids.

At the time of that announcement, Kenneth Weaver, the chief postal inspector, said that Landslide was "the tip of the iceberg" in a growing market for child pornography on the Internet, a statement that was echoed by German authorities today.

"The market for child pornography is growing, and in today's networked world, perpetrators attempt to use the new possibilities for their criminal aims," said Klaus-Jürgen Jeziorsky, the interior minister of Saxony-Anhalt.

1,000 Arrests in U.S.

WASHINGTON, Sept. 26 (Reuters) — The United States government has arrested more than 1,000 child predators and sex offenders since July, Michael Garcia, director of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, said today.