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Macau scam: Everyone's a target

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KUANTAN: It does not matter how educated or wealthy a person is – there is still a possibility that they will fall prey to the Macau Scam.

That is why when we read stories about the victims of the scam, we will find they come from varied backgrounds. Pensioners, professionals, housewives, the unemployed, students, senior citizens and even police officers – all of them have fallen prey to the telecommunication scam.

It is therefore necessary to be extra cautious when answering calls from an unknown number.

Syndicate members are quick to note even the slightest hint of fear in the voice of potential victims and use it to their advantage.

That was what happened to a technician who wants to be known as only Abu Bakar.

The 38-year-old from Beserah, here, lost 15 years' worth of savings in the blink of an eye when he received a call from the 'court' in May.

"The caller introduced himself as an officer of the Kuala Lumpur High Court and claimed that I had outstanding credit card debt, which I denied because I have never owned a credit card from the bank he mentioned.

"He then asked me to file a police report because 'someone might be using my personal data' before connecting me to another line," he told Bernama when met recently.

Personal details

The caller introduced himself as an officer of the Kuala Lumpur High Court and claimed that I had outstanding credit card debt, which I denied because I have never owned a credit card from the bank he mentioned.

Abu Bakar, technician

The connecting line was answered by someone who introduced himself as a police officer at Bukit Aman. The officer accused Abu Bakar of being involved in money laundering and told him that there was a warrant for his arrest.

"Who wouldn't feel panicked when a 'police officer' accuses them of a crime they didn't commit. The way he interrogated me was as if I was a criminal. He also threatened to have my bank account frozen," he recounted.

Frightened, Abu Bakar gave the so-called officer his bank account details and pin number. He also heeded the request to transfer all his money into a given account number for 'safekeeping pending investigations'.

It took Abu Bakar a while to realise that he had been duped. A police officer who wants to be known only as Lokman, 48, said he nearly fell for the scam when one of the syndicate members called him.

"The way they communicate and interrogate potential victims can be quite convincing. They really do sound like police officers – so much so that even I was unnerved, what more civilians," he said.

The syndicate member quickly terminated the call when he realised that he was talking to a real police officer.

Ignorant

The senior vice president of the Malaysian Crime Prevention Foundation (MCPF) Tan Sri Lee Lam Thye said he was still baffled reading about the number of new Macau Scam cases every day and the amount of losses suffered by the victims.

He found the ignorance and lack of knowledge of the public on the issue disconcerting, especially as many of the victims were professionals and from educated backgrounds.

"This shows that perhaps many people still don't bother to read (about current issues) or care about what's going on around them. If this is indeed the case, the local authorities need to work together with all quarters, including the media, to spread the awareness on the Macau Scam and the syndicate's latest tactics," he told Bernama when contacted.

Lee said that based on the Royal Malaysia Police's Commercial Crime Investigation Department statistics, there were 4,500 of SMS and telephone fraud cases reported in 2017 involving some RM113.11 million in losses.

Changing modus operandi

He said it was indicative of criminals getting bolder and more creative in their tactics. The

syndicate is believed to possess experienced 'coaches' who taught them convincing impersonation techniques, making it difficult for victims to detect the con before it was too late. They also seemed to always be a few steps ahead of the enforcement agencies.

"The authorities, particularly the police, need to be able to outsmart them and handle these cases more effectively. They need highly competent ICT staff to track down these criminals.

"At the moment, the authorities look like they are constantly being outwitted by the syndicate. The latter makes use of the latest technologies and frequently changes their modus operandi," he said.

Ignore suspicious calls

He called for the authorities to employ the latest technology to trace the location of the caller and the bank account used to transfer the victims' money.

This can be done by having police work with other agencies such as the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) and Cybersecurity Malaysia.

In addition to that, there needs to be increased cooperation between the country's intelligence and those from the neighbouring countries, as the latter is a favourite base of operation for the syndicate. (CyberSecurity Malaysia is a centre specialising in national cyber security.)

Lee advised the public to ignore phone calls from suspicious numbers and to download mobile phone apps that trace scam phone calls. Victims also need

Tips by the Royal Malaysia Police

To prevent themselves from falling prey to the Macau Scam, the Pahang Commercial CID chief Supt Mohd Wazir Mohd Yusof advises the public:

- To not answer calls from unknown numbers or to disconnect a suspicious call;
- To not discuss their bank cards with anyone over the phone, no matter who they claim to be and to disconnect the line if they ask for such details;
- To not entertain calls about winning anything;
- To quickly abort a call if the caller starts talking about Public Safety Tax or the Inland Revenue Board;
- To abort a call if the caller claims to be from the Kuala Lumpur High Court and talks about an arrest warrant;
- To not click on any links in text messages and to delete such messages; To not answer any call with number starting from 08-111.

to lodge police reports so that the authorities can collect the information needed to locate and nab the scammers.

He also hoped that victims would share their experiences with family and friends so that more people would become aware of the issue and protect themselves from falling prey to the Macau Scam.— Bernama