

Hackers snatched world economic forum attendees' credit-card numbers

by William Drozdiak
The Washington Post
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BRUSSELS, Belgium - A week after its annual conclave of global political and economic luminaries at the Alpine resort of Davos, the World Economic Forum announced Monday that unprecedented security precautions failed to prevent computer hackers from tapping into a database and stealing credit-card numbers of about 1,400 prominent people.

The computer break-in came to light when the Swiss weekly Sonntags Zeitung revealed its reporters had been shown data on a CD-ROM containing 80,000 pages of information, including credit-card numbers, passport information and personal cell-phone contacts of some of the forum's participants, who are among the world's most famous, rich and powerful people. The victims included former president Bill Clinton, former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, South African President Thabo Mbeki, Microsoft Corp. co-founder Bill Gates and other prominent corporate executives, the weekly said.

"We are treating this matter as a serious crime and not as a prank," said Charles McLean, the WEF's director of communications. "We have filed a legal complaint and asked the Swiss authorities to launch a full investigation that we hope will lead to the prosecution of the perpetrators."

McLean said the cyber-attack was carried out by unknown hackers who broke into a "remnant database" that contained information about participants who attended some of the forum's regional meetings held last year. He said the stolen material appeared to consist mainly of biographical data readily available to the public, but for about 1,400 people there was the loss of more private information.

"We have notified all of the par-

ticipants affected by this security breach and advised them to reach their credit-card companies to ensure the security of their accounts," McLean said. "The forum has also initiated legal proceedings to block any use or dissemination of the illegally obtained information and created a telephone hot line for participants who have specific queries about this incident."

During the recent conference, thousands of Swiss police set up an elaborate array of roadblocks and barbed-wire barricades that transformed the Davos conference center into an impenetrable fortress. The security measures were taken to thwart any mayhem by anti-globalization protesters, who had threatened to disrupt what they call an elitist conspiracy to promote the interests of big business to the detriment of the world's poor.

Although McLean insists the identity of the hackers and their political affiliation has not been established, the Swiss newspaper said the material had been collected by anti-globalization protesters. Swiss authorities said they would pursue a preliminary inquiry to determine whether the government should prosecute the hackers on grounds of invasion of privacy.

McLean said none of those participants whose credit-card numbers had been exposed reported any bogus charges on their accounts. He said the forum was confident the hackers did not penetrate the primary Davos database.

During this year's conference, which focused mainly on the fragile nature of the American economy and the global impact of the digital revolution, some of the most heated debate among participants involved questions of personal privacy in the Internet age. This cyber-attack on the Davos database seems likely to elevate that theme on the forum's agenda.

Police use new tool to find fake IDs

by Petula Dvorak
The Washington Post

WASHINGTON - Bouncers in the nation's capital, who have only their experience and keen eyes to fight the increasingly sophisticated fake IDs that college towns seem to spawn, at last have technology on their side.

The Washington D.C. police department is the first in the nation to introduce an army of small scanners to weed out bogus IDs.

"There are over 500 Internet sites that sell fake IDs, and they all look amazing," said Lt. Pat Burke, the department's traffic coordinator.

"They are getting so good that the naked eye can't tell if they're fake. Now we have something that can."

Undercover officers began working the city's bars Friday night, posing as bouncers using the new machines.

Police say the high-tech approach is effective and more genteel than the usual raids, which were often imprecise, time-consuming and decried by the business community.

"Some of the bars thought that we were overly pernicious in targeting them rather than targeting the individuals who use the fake IDs," Burke said.

This weekend is the start of the department's new effort to curb underage drinking after a string of alcohol-related injuries and deaths near Washington college campuses in the last two years.

Seven machines were used by undercover officers at bars from Thursday through Saturday in the neighborhoods of Georgetown, Adams-Morgan and 14th and U streets, and near Catholic, Howard, American and George Washington universities.

Rush-hour bombing injures nine on subway platform

by Maura Reynolds
Los Angeles Times
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MOSCOW - A small bomb exploded on a subway platform during rush hour here Monday, injuring nine people and reviving fears that terrorists are targeting the Russian capital.

Prosecutors said they were investigating the bombing at the Belorusskaya metro station in central Moscow as a terrorist act.

"The most important thing is that everyone is alive," said Vasily Kuptsov, a spokesman for the city police force.

No one immediately claimed responsibility for the blast, and police did not identify any suspects.

Kirill Kumakov, 14, had just gotten on the escalator to exit the station when he heard a bang.

"It wasn't too loud," he said. "I turned around and saw a little black smoke coming from under a bench. A woman and a boy were lying on the ground. There was a smell like burning rubber."

"Then everything was a panic, with people running up the escalator," he added. "They pushed me up and out."

The explosion damaged marble

tile and lighting fixtures on the ornate subway platform, but the damage was minor enough that the station reopened less than three hours after the bombing.

Among the nine people hospitalized were two children.

The incident recalled last summer's bombing in an underground passage at Moscow's Pushkin Square, which killed 13 people. Many officials initially blamed Chechen terrorists for that blast, as they had for a series of apartment house bombings in 1999 that killed about 300 people.

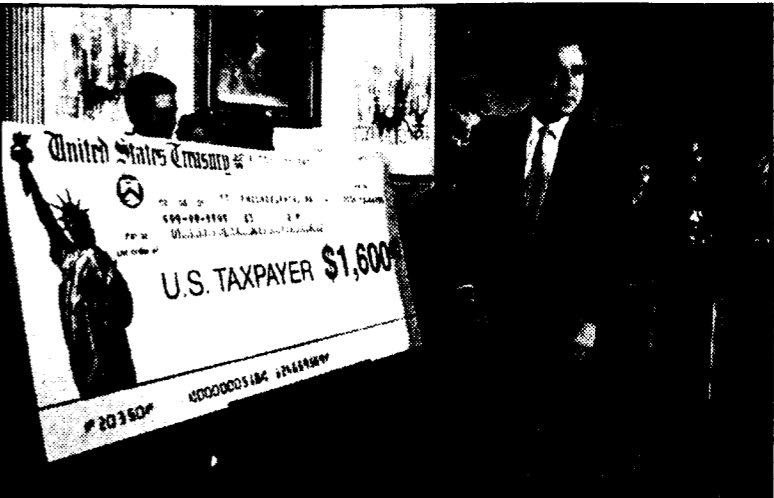
But while investigators claimed to have circumstantial evidence linking Chechen warlords to the apartment blasts, the cases have not been solved.

And investigators eventually acknowledged that the Pushkin Square blast was unconnected to the apartment bombings; instead, it was the result of a dispute between kiosk operators.

But 27-year-old Dmitri Ivanov, who was higher up on the escalator when the Belorusskaya bomb went off, said he doesn't believe those explanations and has no doubts about who was to blame.

"Of course (all the bombs) are connected to each other and to the Chechens," he said. "We're not children."

Bush-wackin' the taxes



President George W. Bush announces his proposal for a tax cut at an event in the Diplomatic Room of the White House, Monday. Behind him are members of three families that participated in the event.

Phil on job shadowing



Punxsutawney Phil checks out the crowd after being pulled from his tree stump by Bill Deeley, the president of the Groundhog Club and Phil's handler, during Groundhog Day festivities in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, in the winter of 1998. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration charges that Punxsutawney Phil is a quack. On Friday Phil appeared once again and saw his shadow.

The Quagga question



Taxidermist Reinhold Rau explains his exhibit on the quagga rebreeding project at the South Africa Museum in Cape Town. A subspecies of the plains zebra, the quagga was hunted to extinction in the 19th century.

PHOTO BY JOHN MURPHY THE BALTIMORE SUN

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Signs of Antarctica melting

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There's new evidence that an important part of the Antarctic might be melting.

Andrew Shepherd of the British Antarctic Survey and colleagues studied satellite data collected from 1992 to 1999 about the Pine Island Glacier, a 20-mile-wide river of ice that is thought to be especially vulnerable to changes in climate.

The glacier is thinning faster than had been thought, the data showed. If the current rate continues, the glacier will be floating within 600 years, which would sharply increase sea levels around the world, the researchers report in the Feb. 2 issue of Science.

It remains unclear whether global warming is playing a role in the glacier's thinning, the researchers said.



A spacecraft gamble in a quest for knowledge

by Kathy Sawyer
The Washington Post
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WASHINGTON - Imagine an old shoe thrown into the air, tumbling end over end. A spunky little dragonfly is flying rings around it, circling closer and closer and finally trying to settle on a certain spot without getting smashed flat.

Next Monday, as a grand finale to its year-long mission, NASA's Near Earth Asteroid Rendezvous Shoemaker spacecraft (NEAR) will attempt a feat not unlike the hypothetical shoe-fly act: the first landing ever on the surface of an asteroid.

It's worth the effort, mission managers have decided, because these space rocks harbor specimens of the primordial rubble out of which Earth and the other inner planets formed more than 4.5 billion years ago. If that isn't enough, some of the larger chunks have helped shape the evolution of Earth and its life-forms by slamming into it - and one of those still out there just may have to be deflected someday in order to save civilization.

Since last Valentine's Day, NEAR has been dancing gingerly around the 21-mile-long asteroid Eros 433 as it spins at a rate of one revolution every 5 hours and 17 minutes. Named for the Greek god of sexual love, Eros is one of the largest and most accessible space rocks known to travel near Earth. Evidence suggests that the impact of a smaller object wiped out the dinosaurs 65 million years ago and, scientists say, there is a slight possibility that Eros will collide with Earth - in perhaps 1.5 million years. Launched in 1996 on a 2 billion-mile chase and currently 196 million miles from Earth, the NEAR spacecraft is already in the record books as the first

ever to go into orbit around any small solar system body (asteroid or comet), the first to operate on solar power so far from the sun, and the first ever to conduct an in-depth study of an asteroid. Circling the rock at distances typically ranging from 22 to 124 miles, by mission's end NEAR will have transmitted more than 160,000 images and taken millions of measurements. It has answered many questions, researchers say, and raised new ones.

But in recent days, spacecraft handlers have focused on the final "first." The 1,100-pound spacecraft was not designed to land, and the decision to try it has been mildly controversial within the team.

"It's turned out to be more complicated than we thought," said mission director Robert Farquhar, of the Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory (APL) in Howard County, Md. APL built the spacecraft and is managing the mission for NASA. The antenna has to point toward Earth with the solar wings oriented toward the sun, while the camera aims at the asteroid. "This means the thrusters aren't lined up," he said, "and that will take some fancy footwork that uses 25 percent more fuel." Oh, and the spacecraft is running out of gas.

"The mission has been such a success, a lot of people are asking why risk failure now," said Farquhar, who conceived the landing idea. "But it's all bonus science. To me, the only real risk is in not taking one."

Around him, the NEAR team in APL's spacecraft operations center was executing a thruster firing to lower the craft's orbit. They watched for a change in the NEAR telemetry numbers on a big wall screen as they teleconferenced with spacecraft navigators at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, Calif. (Instructions sent between Earth and the spacecraft

across 196 million miles take 17.5 minutes one way, at the speed of light.) "We're seeing a response," someone said.

Maneuvering around an asteroid is much trickier than circling a nice round planet. The asteroid's shape has been compared to a peanut and a potato, but Farquhar personally favors a shoe. "It's almost like a Dutch clog," he said.

The force of gravity on Eros' surface averages about one-thousandth that on Earth. A person who weighs 150 pounds on Earth would vary from 0.56 to 1.3 ounces on a tour of Eros.

Its irregular shape similarly gives NEAR a "rough ride" on close passes, mission managers said. NEAR's orbital direction (opposite that of the rock's spin) was designed to minimize the gravitational kicks. (The gravity that holds NEAR in orbit is related to the asteroid's mass - the quantity and distribution of its matter - as well as to the distance between them.) On Jan. 28, NEAR brushed over Eros' "toe" at a record close distance of less than two miles.

On Feb. 12, beginning at about 10:30 a.m. EST, the controllers will begin a final series of engine burns designed to move the craft out of orbit, brake its velocity and - just after 3 p.m. - settle it on the rock's sunlit southern side at a survivable speed of two to seven mph. "I'd say there's about an 85 percent chance that everything will go right," Farquhar said. "But if one of these burns doesn't go off, it could get ugly."

The craft could smack down at up to 20 mph and end up looking like a cardboard model of NEAR that sits tauntingly on the desk of mission operations manager Bob Nelson - crumpled flat.

If all goes well, Farquhar said, the descending craft will snap dozens of images 10 times as detailed as any ever before taken of an asteroid, its camera staying in focus to within about 1,650

feet above the surface and capturing objects as small as 4 inches across. Its destination is on the verge of an intriguing six-mile-wide, saddle-shaped depression peppered with boulders.

After touchdown, Farquhar said, "the most we can hope for is a beacon from NEAR Shoemaker that says it's still operating." Or the craft could tip into what he called "ostrich mode" - head down, its antenna in the dirt.

NEAR's lead scientist, Andrew Cheng of APL, said NEAR's wealth of data has already confirmed, among other things, that Eros is a sample of material largely unchanged since the birth of the solar system (and a relative of the most common type of meteorite - the space debris that falls to Earth). The pristine primordial stuff is impossible to study on our own planet or others where geological activity and heat have cooked and pounded it into something else.

NEAR has also shown that Eros is a solid whole rather than a "rubble pile" of loosely bound pieces like, for example, the asteroid Mathilde, which the craft visited earlier.

"This is the first time we've gotten up close and personal ... with one of these objects that could be like the one that eliminated the dinosaurs," said Ed Weiler, NASA's head of space science, pronouncing the relatively low-cost (\$223 million) mission "a total success story."

NEAR has also posed new riddles. "On the tiny fraction of the surface we've seen at high resolution, we noticed strange processes we haven't seen on the moon or anywhere else," including unexplained landslides of surface material, said Joseph Ververka of Cornell University, NEAR imaging team leader. "We need to get a better look."

Next Monday is their one chance.

Bigger babies may be smarter

The Washington Post
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It has long been known that babies who are born underweight can suffer a wide range of health problems, including slower cognitive development. Now, it turns out, the opposite might also be true - bigger babies might be smarter.

Marcus Richards of the University College in London and colleagues studied 3,900 children born in England in 1946, testing them repeatedly through age 43.

Those born weighing more than the average weight of 5.5 pounds tended to score higher on tests measuring intelligence, especially when they were children and young adults, the researchers reported in the Jan. 27 issue of the British Medical Journal. The effect, however, appeared to diminish by middle age, the researchers found.

The impact of weight on initial intelligence might be linked to the children having bigger brains, or having more connections within their brains, the researchers speculated.

