

77 arrested in e-mail scam crackdown

By RANDOLPH E. SCHMID, Associated Press Writer

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WASHINGTON - The e-mails arrive out of the blue, from Nigeria or other exotic countries. They tell of inheritances, political problems, other reasons someone needs to get money out of the country. If you help, they promise to let you share the money.

Unfortunately, thousands of people fall for the scam, losing an average of \$3,000 to \$4,000 each.

So far this year, an average of more than 800 people a month have filed complaints about such scams.

Hoping to stem the losses, the [U.S. Postal Inspection Service](#) announced an international crackdown Wednesday in which more than 540,000 fake checks with a face value of \$2.1 billion have been seized.

There have been 60 arrests in the Netherlands, 16 in Nigeria and one in Canada, the Postal Inspection Service said, and the effort is continuing.

"There is no room in the mail for any of these phony come-ons," Postmaster General John Potter said.

Most of the cons start with e-mails telling of an inheritance or lottery win and ask the victim to help bring the money to the United States. The victim is asked to cash a check that comes in the mail and to send part of the money back to the person sending it, said Greg Campbell, inspector in charge of global security and investigations for the Postal Inspection Service.

Then that person disappears with the money and the original check bounces, leaving the victim with a loss.

Retired people have lost their nest eggs and young families have been defrauded of their savings for a home, Potter said.

Many of the cases originate in the Netherlands, where West African con artists operate from Internet cafes, said Johan Van Hartskamp, commissioner of the Amsterdam police.

In what he called "Operation Dutch Treat," police have arrested 60 people there, with three extradited to the United States and four more facing extradition. The rest are being prosecuted in the Netherlands, he said.

Ibrahim Lamorde, director of the Nigerian Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, said the problem is monumental and "will only be surmounted through global efforts."

U.S. Assistant Attorney General Alice Fisher said: "There is no lottery. There is no inheritance. The checks are not real. But there are real victims. The crime knows no borders, and our coordinated law enforcement knows no borders."