

Queensland Police Service Australia,
State Crime Operations Command Task Force Argos
Operation Achilles

The Queensland Police Service's (QPS) Taskforce Argos was instrumental in infiltrating and dismantling a highly secretive and organised network of international child sex offenders. The network traded images depicting the violent sexual abuse of children globally, including having children sexually abused live and on demand for the benefit of its members. Complex encryption and file transfer, hard drive protection, communications were utilised by the group to avoid law enforcement detection.

Operation 'Achilles' began in January 2006 and closed on February 29, 2008 with the execution of warrants and the arrest of offenders in Australia, the United States, Germany and the United Kingdom. The operation was aptly named as police were looking for the "Achilles heel" or the weak spot to allow the infiltration and dismantling of the network.

The operation commenced when Queensland Police received intelligence from the Department of Internal Affairs in New Zealand. Task Force Argos covert operatives subsequently infiltrated the international child sex offender network that were trading images and videos depicting the violent sexual abuse of children.

In June 2006 during phase one of 'Operation Achilles' Task Force Argos intercepted several videos being distributed within the child sex offender network depicting two young girls being sexually abused by an adult male. A detailed analysis of the videos confirmed that they were European in origin and that the video was of commercial quality. This information was relayed to Interpol Headquarters in Lyon, France and an operational law enforcement network consisting of the QPS, Interpol, BKA (Bundeskriminalamt) in Germany and Austria, Netherlands and Belgian Federal Police was activated to locate the children.

In July 2006 Queensland Police provided further information to the international law enforcement agency (LEA) network of the existence of the commercial child exploitation material containing movie files of the two young girls. After extensive investigations the identity of the girls was discovered on July 26 and the man sexually assaulting them was identified as their Belgian father. Both children were immediately removed from risk and their father was arrested by Belgian Federal Police. The father received 10 years imprisonment.

On August 16 following information from Interpol and Belgian investigators, Italian authorities arrested the web site creator, administrator and film maker. It is alleged that he produced more than 150 videos, many produced to order in the Ukraine, the Netherlands and Belgium. A number of child victims were identified as a result and were removed from harm. The film maker and web site administrator was sentenced to 10 years imprisonment.

The discovery of the videos and child abuse web sites then triggered what was to be a 15-month long investigation by Europol, codenamed 'Koala' in recognition of its Australian origins. In the coordinated international action, 2500 "customers" in 19 countries were

identified and thousands of computers, videos and photographs were seized. In a large number of cases, more than a million files and pictures were found.

The Australian component of 'Koala' was coordinated nationally by Task Force Argos and the tactical phase codenamed 'Operation Pariah' was executed in November 2007 resulting in nine arrests in Queensland and the dissemination of a further 48 target profiles nationally.

A Task Force Argos operative was deployed to the FBI Innocent Images Unit in Washington DC, from August 2006 until February 2008 to maintain covert infiltration of the network. A second Argos covert operative was deployed in 2007 for two months to assist in data collation and intelligence dissemination. The United States was chosen as the base for operations due to the fact that the majority of the sex offender network members had been identified as US residents.

The successful completion of 'Operation Achilles' and its associated sub-operations has now resulted in the removal of more than 70 children from sexually abusive situations, the arrest of 22 network members globally, the closure of four commercial child exploitation websites and arrest of more than 100 offenders internationally who allegedly purchased child exploitation material.

The National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children were actively involved in the victim identification process of the investigation, and were consulted early in the investigation to cross check intelligence holdings against Cybertip reports. Their active involvement resulted in the coordination and location of a number of US child victims.

The US offenders (14) were sentenced to a minimum of 16 years imprisonments, with the majority receiving life + 30 to 50 year sentences.

The UK Offenders (2) were sentenced to between 2 and 25 years imprisonment, with multiple child victims located across the United Kingdom

The Australian offenders (2) were sentenced to between 15 months and 6 years imprisonment.

The German offenders are currently pre trial with forensic examination to be finalised. Three child victims were located and rescued as a result of this operation.

Law enforcement partners also involved in coordination of this operation included:

Europol, Interpol, The Department of Internal Affairs New Zealand, Toronto Police Service