



**12 January 2010**

## **SOCA WARNS OF 'ROMANCE FRAUD' KIDNAP THREAT**

The Serious Organised Crime Agency is warning the public to be alert to a dangerous new development in romance frauds after a British national was kidnapped.

The individual travelled to West Africa believing they would be met by someone with whom they had established an online friendship. The 'friend' turned out to be the fictional creation of a criminal group whose sole aim was extorting money. The victim was assaulted and imprisoned for four days until a ransom was paid.

Since 2007 there have been reports of Australian, Belgian and German nationals being kidnapped as a result of romance fraud but this is the first reported occasion when the victim was British.

Along with advance fee frauds, fake lotteries and inheritance frauds, romance fraud is one of many mass market frauds designed to trick people into parting with money. The criminal groups target singles columns and dating websites to search for potential victims. They create fictitious online profiles or send out unsolicited emails or letters, often with fake photographs. Great care and effort goes into establishing trust, and victims can be completely unaware that they have been targeted by criminals. Once trust is created, the fraudster pretends to be in urgent need of money and many victims have been persuaded to part with large sums before their suspicions are aroused. Some frauds go on for months, and even years.

SOCA is working globally to target the groups responsible. Work to date in Nigeria has seen a substantial drop in the volume of fraud mail leaving the country. In Ghana, SOCA is working with the CID to help prevent the problem taking root. A

recent operation in Accra saw 9 arrests and the recovery of a gun from a car which had been sent to meet a potential victim. SOCA's Anti Kidnap and Extortion Unit is also training local officers on the ground to help them deal with any kidnaps effectively.

SOCA fraud expert Colin Woodcock said:

“Romance frauds are damaging enough, draining people’s money and damaging their confidence. But the possibility of kidnap is a sinister development.

“This is a very sensitive subject. People can feel embarrassed at being tricked, or even unwilling to believe that the person they have got to know remotely is a criminal who is after their money. We know the networks rely on these responses to reduce the chance that the victim will report the crime, and we are sure there is significant under-reporting by victims as a result.

“In the case of same-sex romance frauds there is the added threat in some countries of laws against homosexuality. Criminals use the fear of legal repercussions to make victims feel unsafe in going to the authorities, or even to extort more money. It is a vicious and manipulative crime.”

SOCA is urging anyone who is considering using dating sites or singles columns to follow a few key steps to protect themselves:

- Be suspicious of anyone that you haven't met in person who asks you to send money abroad. Even sending a cheque for a small amount can provide fraudsters with your bank details and a genuine document which may be altered and used in another fraudulent way.
- Speak to them online via a webcam and ask yourself whether this is the same person you have been chatting to online or by e-mail. Check their answers are consistent with what's been said before.
- Many victims of romance fraud are blind to the dangers they face, so if you know of anyone travelling abroad to meet someone they have met online, help them assess the risks.
- The Foreign and Commonwealth Office website is the best source of country specific travel advice and will explain how to exercise sensible personal security measures. Visit [www.fco.gov.uk/en/travelling-and-living-overseas/travel-advice-by-country/sub-saharan-africa/](http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/travelling-and-living-overseas/travel-advice-by-country/sub-saharan-africa/)

- Do report incidents of actual **and** attempted frauds, kidnaps and extortion to the police and FCO, and be assured that reports will be dealt with in the strictest confidence.
- Tell someone trustworthy where you are going and plan regular contacts. Agree what they should do if you miss a contact.
- Help in protecting against online fraud and other internet scams can also be found at [soca.gov.uk](http://soca.gov.uk) and [www.getsafeonline.org](http://www.getsafeonline.org)

**For more information contact the SOCA press office on 0870 268 8100**