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SOUTH KOREA: Shocked public wants Telegram trafficker identified

By Ser Myo-Ja

Korea Joongang Daily (23.03.2020) – <https://bit.ly/3adU5Ap> – Following the arrest of a 26-year-old who allegedly kept dozens of women, including underage girls, in sexual slavery and offered chats showing videos of violent sex through an instant messaging app, public demands rose for the release of his full name and those of his clients.

President Moon Jae-in ordered the police Monday to expand its investigation into his clients.

On March 16, the National Police Agency arrested the 26-year-old man surnamed Cho, who they had been investigating since September.

The man was accused of sex trafficking dozens of women, producing illegal pornographic materials and distributing them for profit through the Telegram instant messaging app, where he was known as "Baksa," meaning doctor or guru in Korean. He has not been formally charged.

So far, at least 74 victims, including 16 children and teenagers, were confirmed. The police also tracked down 13 possible co-conspirators of Cho and arrested four of them. Investigations are ongoing into the rest.

The Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency said Monday it is going after subscribers of Cho's bizarrely violent and gruesome video service.

"We are well aware of the public furor and that the people who joined Baksa's group chat rooms to watch videos are not simple bystanders but active accomplices in organized sex crimes," a police official said. "We will conduct investigations to punish them based on concerned laws."

The police estimated that Cho's chat rooms had about 10,000 subscribers.

For months, the police investigated the creation and distribution of illegal sex crime videos through Telegram, an encrypted instant messaging service that has been used by protesters to avoid government surveillance in places like Hong Kong, but also by criminals, white supremacists and terrorists. According to the police, 124 suspects were charged with crimes including Cho.

According to police, Cho was a vicious sexual predator. He allegedly recruited women by offering part-time jobs and made them sex slaves by threatening to distribute their naked

photos. He allegedly carved his nickname Baksa into the skin of some victims to claim them as his property, the police said.

According to the police, Cho also threatened to blackmail customers. He also ordered some of his customers to rape underage girls, police claim.

Cho's service offered free previews and a range of raunchy chats that got more expensive as they got more extreme. He was paid in cryptocurrencies.

He allegedly hired employees to rape victims and launder money. He communicated with them through Telegram messages and never met his employees, the police said.

Following Cho's arrest, the Blue House's public petition board received several demands for his full identity. One petition demanding full disclosure of his identity was signed by over 2.3 million people as of 5 p.m. Monday. Another petition, demanding the identities of accomplices and customers to be publicly released, was signed by over 1.6 million people.

If a Blue House petition gets more than 200,000 signatures within 30 days, the Blue House is supposed to formally respond.

"President Moon offered sincere words of consolation to the victims including the 16 children and teens," Blue House spokesman Kang Min-seok said Monday. "He said he agrees with the people's rightful rage."

Moon said the government will do its best to delete the digital videos and offer legal, medical and psychological support to the victims.

Noting that he takes seriously three million people signing petitions within a short period of time, Moon ordered the police to thoroughly investigate this heinous crime, Kang

said.

Moon ordered the police to investigate not only the chat room operators, but all users, urging the police to create a special investigation team to do so.

The police said Monday it will decide Tuesday whether to disclose the full identity of Cho.

Meanwhile, the police are still investigating a separate but related Telegram sex crime case. The police are tracing a user nicknamed "GodGod," who is believed to be the pioneer of such sexual chat rooms in Korea.

He reportedly operated eight Telegram chat rooms from February through September last year and distributed hundreds of illegal sex videos.

According to women's rights groups, about 60 Telegram chat rooms exist to share sex videos that involve underage people or violence. In total, they have about 260,000 subscribers.

Korea has relatively mild punishments for cyberspace sex crimes. Clause 2 of Article 14 of the Act on Special Cases Concerning the Punishment of Sexual Crimes said a person who creates or distributes photographs or videos against the will of a person photographed is punishable by up to five years in prison or a fine of up to 30 million won (\$23,700).

Clause 5 of Article 11 of the Act on the Protection of Children and Youth against Sex Offenses says, "Any person who possesses child or youth pornography knowing that it is child or youth pornography shall be punished by imprisonment with labor for not more than one year or by a fine not exceeding 20 million won."

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