United States Attorney's Office District of Connecticut
Press Release

January 14, 2010 Romanian Citizen Pleads Guilty to Federal Spamming Charge

Nora R. Dannehy, United States Attorney for the District of Connecticut, announced that CORNEL IONUT TONITA, 28, of Galati, Romania, pleaded guilty today before United States Magistrate Judge Holly B. Fitzsimmons in Bridgeport to one count of conspiracy to commit fraud in connection with electronic mail ("spamming"). The charge stems from a "phishing" scheme that victimized individuals, financial institutions and companies.

A phishing scheme uses the Internet to target large numbers of unwary individuals, using fraud and deceit to obtain private personal and financial information such as names, addresses, bank account numbers, credit card numbers and Social Security numbers. Phishing schemes often work by sending out large numbers of counterfeit e-mail messages, or "spam," which are made to appear as if they originated from legitimate banks, financial institutions or other companies.

In pleading guilty, TONITA admitted that, from approximately February 2005 through April 2005, he conspired with others to engage in spamming. TONITA was paid to use software tools to harvest email addresses from Internet sites, focusing primarily on colleges and universities in the United States. TONITA then provided the email addresses to others with the knowledge that they would send spam to those email addresses.

Specifically, on approximately March 19, 2005, TONITA sent a file containing approximately 9,811 email addresses to a co-conspirator.

On January 18, 2007, a federal grand jury in New Haven returned an indictment charging TONITA and five other Romanian citizens for their alleged participation in the phishing scheme.

On July 18, 2009, TONITA was arrested on an Interpol warrant at the sea border crossing in Dubrovnik, Croatia. He was extradited to the U.S. on September 4, 2009.

The investigation of this matter stemmed from a citizen's complaint concerning a fraudulent e-mail message made to appear as if it

originated from Connecticut-based *People's Bank*. In fact, the e-mail message directed victims to a computer in Minnesota that had been compromised, or "hacked," and used to host a counterfeit *People's Bank* Internet site. During the course of the investigation, it was determined that the defendants had allegedly engaged in similar phishing schemes against many other financial institutions and companies, including *Citibank*, *Capital One*, *JPMorgan Chase & Co.*, *Comerica Bank*, *Wells Fargo & Co.*, *eBay* and *PayPal*.

TONITA is scheduled to be sentenced by United States District Judge Janet C. Hall on April 5, 2010, at which time TONITA faces a maximum term of imprisonment of five years.

This matter has been investigated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation in New Haven, Connecticut, and the Connecticut Computer Crimes Task Force. Critical assistance to the investigation also has been provided by the FBI Legal Attachés in Vienna, Bucharest and Ottawa; Interpol in Zagreb and Washington, D.C.; the Romanian National Police; the Croatian Criminal Police Directorate and Croatian General Police Directorate; the U.S. Embassy in Sarajevo; the Royal Canadian Mounted Police; Canada Border Services Agency in Montreal; and the United States Marshals Service.

The case is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Edward Chang.

CONTACT: **U.S. ATTORNEY'S OFFICE**
Tom Carson
(203) 821-3722
thomas.carson@usdoj.gov