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AUBURN MAN INDICTED FOR ONLINE EXTORTION

MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA— Jonathan Wryn Vance, 24, of Auburn, Alabama, was indicted by a federal grand jury on charges of interstate extortion and interstate transportation in aid of extortion, U. S. Attorney Leura G. Canary announced today. Vance is accused of using the internet and a number of different online screen names, including "metascape" and "manescape 22," to transmit threatening communications to more than 40 minor females and young women in Alabama between 2006 and 2007.

According to the ten-count indictment, Vance engaged in a pattern of extortion or attempted extortion in which he would at first pretend to be a family member, friend, acquaintance, or secret admirer of his female victims in order to gain their trust. The indictment alleges that Vance sometimes accomplished this by initiating a seemingly playful game in which he would pose as an anonymous long lost friend or secret admirer who would only reveal his true identity if the recipient truthfully answered a series of 10 questions. The questions allegedly asked for body measurements, vaginal grooming, past sexual experiences, and current sexual fantasies, and were purportedly designed to elicit intimate and embarrassing personal information from the victims.

Members of the public are reminded that the indictment contains only charges. A defendant is presumed innocent of the charges and it will be the government's burden to prove the defendant's guilt beyond a reasonable doubt at trial.

As soon as he had acquired the information, Vance would allegedly demand that the victims provide him with their confidential sign-on information for various interactive computer services, such as Facebook.com, MySpace.com, Hotmail.com, and Yahoo.com, and/or digital still images or webcam video of themselves in various states of undress, exposing themselves, or engaging in sexually explicit conduct. He allegedly told victims that if they did not comply with his demands, he would injure their reputations by transmitting the intimate and embarrassing personal information about them to other people, including their peers, church members, and employers.

The indictment also states that Vance sometimes approached his victims by posing as one of their own family members, friends or online contacts. Under that guise, Vance would allegedly send an email or instant message to one victim using another victim's account, pretending that the sender could not access her Facebook.com or MySpace.com account and needed to borrow the recipient's account sign-on information in order to address the problem. Once he had obtained access to his victims' accounts, Vance would allegedly change the passwords, effectively holding the accounts hostage. He would then allegedly inform the victims of the trick and demand that they send him digital images or webcam video transmissions of themselves in various states of undress, nude, or engaging in sexually explicit conduct, in order to regain access to their accounts.

According to the indictment, some victims complied to varying degrees with Vance's demands while others did not. Most of the threatening communications were allegedly sent via the America Online (AOL) Instant Messenger instant messaging service (AIM).

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Vance has yet to be arraigned on these charges, and a trial date has not been set. If convicted of all ten counts alleged in the indictment, Vance could be sentenced to serve as much as 35 years in federal prison. Each count is also punishable by a $250,000 fine, a $100 mandatory assessment fee, and a term of supervised release.

The indictment comes as a result of an investigation that began in the summer of 2007, with agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation working in cooperation with officers from the Hoover Police Department, the Tuscaloosa Police Department, the Huntsville Police Department, and the Auburn Police Department. Vance is currently in the custody of the U.S. Marshals in Birmingham, Alabama, where he has been ordered detained while awaiting trial on additional federal charges stemming from the same alleged pattern of extortion. Those charges are being prosecuted by Daniel Fortune, Assistant United States Attorney for the Northern District of Alabama, in a case that is currently set for trial on February 2, 2009, before the Honorable R. David Proctor, United States District Judge.

This case was brought as part of Project Safe Childhood. In May 2006, the U.S. Department of Justice launched Project Safe Childhood, a nationwide initiative to combat the growing epidemic of child sexual exploitation and abuse. Led by United States Attorneys' Offices, Project Safe Childhood marshals federal, state and local resources to better locate, apprehend and prosecute individuals who exploit children via the Internet, as well as to identify and rescue victims. For more information about Project Safe Childhood, please visit www.projectsafechildhood.gov/.

Assistant United States Attorney Nathan D. Stump will prosecute the case.

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