

British police probe tabloid phone-hacking claims

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News Corporation founder Rupert Murdoch, pictured in April 2009. The police probed allegations that a top-selling newspaper paid private investigators to hack into the mobile phones of thousands of high-profile figures.

British police probed allegations Thursday that a top-selling newspaper paid private investigators to hack into the mobile phones of thousands of high-profile figures.

Government ministers, actors, singers, football stars, models and novelists were among those allegedly targeted by the [News](#) of the World, a keystone of media baron Rupert Murdoch's global empire.

London's Metropolitan Police said it would swiftly "establish the facts"

and was to issue a statement at 1600 GMT.

The Guardian newspaper said publishers News Group Newspapers had paid more than one million pounds (1.6 million dollars) out of court to suppress legal cases that would have revealed evidence about the scale of phone tapping.

Former deputy prime minister John Prescott -- among those allegedly hit -- is demanding to know why he was not told if the police knew his phone had been tapped.

News Group publishes News of the World, which sells 2.9 million copies every Sunday, as well as The Sun, the country's best-selling daily newspaper. Both tabloids are rich in celebrity and sports stories.

In a statement to AFP, News Group's parent company News International said it was "inappropriate to comment at this time".

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, attending the Group of Eight summit in L'Aquila, Italy, said: "This raises questions that are serious that will obviously have to be answered."

Brown said he did not want to go further ahead of the forthcoming police statement.

The practice was first exposed when the News of the World's royal editor was jailed in 2007 after the phone messages of aides to Prince William, second in line to the throne, were illegally accessed.

The Guardian report significantly broadened the alleged scope of illegally hacking into the mobile phone messages of public figures in order to generate stories.

Reporters were said by the daily to have hired private investigators to access personal data such as addresses, tax records, social security files and bank statements.

Among those allegedly targeted were actors Gwyneth Paltrow and Jude Law, singer George Michael, ex-England football manager Sven-Goran Eriksson, novelist Jeffrey Archer and Prescott.

Models Elle Macpherson and Lisa Snowdon, London Mayor Boris Johnson, the late reality television star Jade Goody and chef Nigella Lawson were also targeted, The Guardian said.

Metropolitan Police commissioner Paul Stephenson said his assistant commissioner John Yates would "establish the facts" about the claims.

"If we need to investigate, we will investigate," he told Sky News television. "We will do the right thing and do what we have to do to investigate crime wherever it exists."

News of the World royal editor Clive Goodman was jailed for four months in 2007 for hacking into more than 600 messages on mobile phones of aides to the royal family, including Prince William.

The Guardian alleged that during the Goodman inquiry, officers had found evidence of News Group staff using private detectives who hacked into "thousands" of mobile phones.

In one of the three cases it settled, News Group reportedly paid out 700,000 pounds in damages and legal costs to Gordon Taylor, the head of the Professional Footballers' Association.

The Guardian said Taylor sued the newspaper group after a private detective hacked into his phone.

News Group settled with a condition that Taylor sign a gagging clause to prevent him speaking about the case, The Guardian said.

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