

Murdoch to pay Jude Law, 36 others for hacking

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A Thursday, Dec. 8, 2011 photo from files showing actor Jude Law as he poses for photographers at the European Premiere of Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows, at a central London cinema. Rupert Murdoch's British newspaper company on Thursday agreed to pay damages to 36 high-profile victims of tabloid phone-hacking, including actor Jude Law, soccer player Ashley Cole and former British Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott. In the 15 settlements whose financial terms were made public, amounts generally ran into the tens of thousands of pounds (dollars) _ although Law received 130,000 pounds (about \$200,000/156,000 euro) to settle claims against the now-shuttered News of the World tabloid and its sister paper, The Sun. (AP Photo/Joel Ryan)

(AP) -- Rupert Murdoch's media empire apologized and agreed to cash payouts Thursday to 37 people - including a movie star, a soccer player, a top British politician and the son of a serial killer - who were harassed and phone-hacked by his tabloid press.

The four - Jude Law, Ashley Cole, John Prescott and Chris Shipman - were among three dozen victims who received financial damages from Murdoch's British newspaper company for illegal eavesdropping and other intrusions, including email snooping.

Financial details of 15 of the payouts, totaling more than 640,000 pounds (about \$1 million), were made public at a court hearing Thursday. The amounts generally ran into the tens of thousands of pounds - although Law received 130,000 pounds (about \$200,000), plus legal costs, to settle claims against the now-shuttered News of the World tabloid and its sister tabloid, The Sun.

Law was one of 60 people who have sued Murdoch's News Group Newspapers, claiming their mobile phone voicemails were hacked. Others whose settlements were announced Thursday at London's High Court included former government ministers Chris Bryant and Tessa Jowell, rugby player Gavin Henson, Princess Diana's former lover James Hewitt, singer Dannii Minogue and Sara Payne, the mother of a murdered girl.

It was the largest group of settlements announced yet in the long-running hacking scandal, which has shaken Murdoch's global empire, spurred the resignations of several of his top executives and reverberated through Britain's political, police and media elite.

Law, the star of "Sherlock Holmes" and "The Talented Mr. Ripley," said he was "truly appalled" at the scale of surveillance and privacy invasion that his case had exposed.

"No aspect of my private life was safe from intrusion by News Group Newspapers, including the lives of my children and the people who work for me," he said in a statement. "It was not just that my phone messages were listened to. News Group also paid people to watch me and my house for days at a time and to follow me and those close to me, both in this country and abroad."

News Group Newspapers admitted that 16 articles about Law published in the News of the World between 2003 and 2006 had been obtained by phone hacking, and that the actor had also been placed under "repeated and sustained physical surveillance." The company also admitted that articles in The Sun had misused Law's private information - although it didn't go as far as to admit hacking by that paper.

Law said Murdoch's tabloids had been "prepared to do anything to sell their newspapers and to make money, irrespective of the impact it had on people's lives."

"I changed my phones, I had my house swept for bugs but still the information kept being published," Law said. "I started to become distrustful of people close to me."

The slew of settlements is one consequence of the revelations of phone-hacking and other illegal tactics at the News of the World, where journalists routinely intercepted voicemails of those in the public eye in a relentless search for scoops.

Murdoch closed the 168-year-old paper in July amid a wave of public revulsion over its hacking of the voicemails of missing 13-year-old Milly Dowler, who was later found murdered. More than a dozen ex-Murdoch employees have been arrested by police investigating phone hacking and bribery.

British politicians and police have also been ensnared in the scandal, which exposed the cozy relationship between senior officers, top lawmakers and Murdoch newspaper executives. A government-commissioned inquiry set up in the wake of the scandal is currently investigating the ethics of Britain's media and its links to police and politicians.

Law's ex-wife and actress Sadie Frost received 50,000 pounds (about \$77,000) in damages for phone hacking and deceit by the News of the World. Bryant received 30,000 pounds (about \$46,000), while Prescott - a prominent member of the Labour Party who was Britain's former deputy prime minister - accepted 40,000 pounds (about \$62,000).

After each statement, News Group lawyer Michael Silverleaf stood to express the news company's "sincere apologies" for the damage and distress its illegal activity had caused.

Many of the statements ended with victims saying they felt vindicated after years in which Murdoch's company denied phone hacking had been widespread at the News of the World. The company had initially vowed to fight the claims in court.

"Today's court decision at long last brings clarity, apology and compensation for the years of hacking into my telephone messages by Rupert Murdoch's News Group Newspapers," Prescott told his local newspaper, the Hull Daily Mail. "It follows years of aggressive denials and a cavalier approach to private information and the law."

The claimants described feeling mistrust, fear and paranoia as phone messages went missing, journalists knew their movements in advance or private information appeared in the media.

Frost said the paper's activity had caused her and Law to suspect one

another. Henson said he accused the family of his then-wife, singer Charlotte Church, of leaking stories to the press.

Other claimants included Guy Pelly, a friend of Prince William who was awarded 40,000 pounds (about \$62,000), and Tom Rowland, a journalist who wrote for one of Murdoch's own newspapers, the Sunday Times. He received 25,000 pounds (\$39,000) after News Group admitted hacking his phone.

In a handful of cases the company admitted hacking into emails, as well as telephone voice mails. Christopher Shipman, whose father, Dr. Harold Shipman, was a notorious serial killer thought to have murdered more than 200 of his patients, had emails containing sensitive legal and medical information intercepted by the News of the World. He was awarded "substantial" undisclosed damages.

The settlements announced Thursday amount to more than half of the phone-hacking lawsuits facing Murdoch's company, but the number of victims is estimated to be in the hundreds.

Mark Lewis, a lawyer for many victims, said in an email that the fight against Murdoch's media empire wasn't over.

"While congratulations are due to those (lawyers) and clients who have settled their cases, it is important that we don't get carried away into thinking that the war is over," Lewis said. "Fewer than 1 percent of the people who were hacked have settled their cases. There are many more cases in the pipeline. ... This is too early to celebrate, we're not even at the end of the beginning."

Many victims had earlier settled with the company, including actress Sienna Miller - whose on-again, off-again romance with Law generated widespread press interest - and the parents of murdered teenager

Dowler, who were awarded 2 million pounds (about \$3.1 million) in compensation.

Ten further cases are due to go to court next month, though lawyers said more settlements are likely.

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