Africa needs to beef up cyber security urgently: experts

October 26 2018

Africa is being increasingly targeted by hackers and must invest in cyber security, industry leaders said at the third Africa Cyber Security Conference closing Friday in Ivory Coast.

Although Africa is not a prime target, "cyber threats have no more borders" and data pirates "attack anything that moves", said Michel Bobillier, a leader of IBM's elite security unit, the Tiger Team.

"The creativity of these people is very great, they have organisations, real structured ecosystems, with a great deal of money and technology" to launch complex attacks, he said in Abidjan, Ivory Coast's main city.

Auguste Diop, managing director of Talentys, an Ivorian company operating in West Africa, said cybercriminals worldwide amassed a staggering 3,000 billion euros ($2,600 billion) in 2015, a sum he expected to double by 2021.

Specific figures are unavailable for the African continent, but its banks and telecoms firms are the main target for pirates.

They operate by bank fraud and exploiting the new tools for electronic payment, notably money transfers and the payment of bills on mobile phones, which are expanding fast.

To take advantage of the growing market for cyber security, Orange CyberDefense—a subsidary of multinational telecoms operator

Orange—plans to open an hub in Morocco in 2019, with satellites in Tunisia, Ivory Coast and Senegal.

"The market for cyber security in Africa will expand from 1.7 billion dollars (1.5 billion euros) in 2017 to more than 2.5 billion in 2020," forecast Michel Van den Berghe, managing director of Orange CyberDefense, speaking to AFP by phone.

"Cybercrime could destroy confidence in the development of digital technology," he warned, calling for measures to "reassure companies that wish to invest in Africa".

'Change mindsets'

Attacks using ransomware—in which hackers use a malware virus to infiltrate a computer and encrypt data, then proposing to provide a coded key to "unlock" the data on payment of a ransom—have "doubled in a year", Van den Berghe says. In Africa, attacks have gone up by "20 or 30 percent" over that period.

"Everyone is threatened" in Africa, notably by data theft from individuals, companies and governments, according to Diop.

"Africa is lagging behind, digital security is in its infancy," he said, though he noted that nations such as Kenya and South Africa are "more mature zones".

"Cyber defence can weigh heavy on budgets, but cyber attacks cost a whole lot more dearly to companies," Bobillier said.

For Visa's regional bureau in Abidjan, covering 18 countries in West and Central Africa, "each attack costs an average of 1.2 million dollars," mainly in lost income, said risk manager Lawal Aribidesi, who did not

specify the number of attacks.

"The challenge is to change mindsets, to bring the culture of security to business," said Boukary Ouedraogo, managing director of Atos Afrique de l'Ouest, the regional subsidiary of one of the world's main digital services firms.

"As a latecomer to digital technology, Africa can turn its handicap into an advantage by avoiding the errors made in cyber security by Europe and America," Diop suggested.

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