

## FTC CRACKS DOWN ON VISA LOTTERY WEB SITES

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WASHINGTON -- The Federal Trade Commission on Thursday accused the operators of eight Web sites of scamming foreigners trying to enter a lottery for about 50,000 immigrant visas to the United States.

The agency contended the operators misled consumers about the services the sites provided and suggested associations with the federal government that were nonexistent.

"These bogus operators not only picked consumers' pockets, they may have nixed their victims' only opportunity to enter this year's diversity visa lottery," said Howard Beales, director of the FTC's Bureau of Consumer Protection.

The commission said it had filed a civil complaint in federal court against John Romano and Hoda Nofal of Global Web Solutions Inc. in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. The court issued a temporary restraining order prohibiting the defendants from making any misrepresentations on their Web sites and freezing their assets.

Reilly Dolan, assistant director for enforcement in the FTC's consumer protection bureau, said the agency was tipped off to the sites by complaints from victims.

Dolan said the commission does not know how many people may have been scammed. He said the Web sites had made about \$3 million in sales.

The Internet sites, some of them in Italian and Japanese, offered foreigners help registering for the State Department's visa lottery program, which gives immigrants a chance to apply for a permanent visa or green card.

In addition to allegedly trying to pass themselves off as linked to the government, the FTC claims, the Web sites also offered applications for the lottery to foreigners who weren't eligible for the program. The sites charged fees ranging from \$40 to \$250.

The government does not charge a fee to enter the lottery, which is open to foreigners in countries with low rates of immigration to the United States.

Romano and Nofal could not be reached for comment.