

Cyber-attack threat has never been greater

A high-ranking Garda from Kerry has warned that Ireland is by no means immune to cyber-attacks, sophisticated or otherwise, and there are many groups well capable of posing a major threat.

Assistant Commissioner Michael O'Sullivan, who has specific responsibility for preventing, detecting and investigating acts of domestic and international terrorism, said there is now an expanding attack surface and the cyber threat has never been greater.

He told the inaugural Cyber Security Transatlantic Policy Forum at The Brehon in Killarney that cyber is one of the many vectors that can enable the threat of espionage, sabotage, unlawful acts that subvert or undermine parliamentary democracy and foreign interference.

"We believe that advance persistent threat groups are interested in carrying out operations in Ireland," Asst Commissioner O'Sullivan told delegates at the weekend conference.

He said the world is borderless in the area of cyber and it requires a global response. The role of An Garda Siochana is to collaborate with international agencies and partners in the cyber remit.

Activities the Kerry Garda spearheads to support national security include carrying out threat assessment for the Department of Justice and, ultimately, for the Government, and that covers domestic and international terrorism and extreme left wing or right wing activities as well as conducting tactical operation overviews and intelligence-led investigations.

Asst Commissioner Michael O'Sullivan, who is a native of Tuosist, said we are living in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambitious world and the cyber threat to all modern nations has never been greater.

There is now a greater dependence on automated software and hardware systems used in the running and management of critical national infrastructure and the attack surface has grown exponentially and at unprecedented level, he pointed out.

Systems critical to the functioning of industry and national infrastructure, which effectively control and store commercial, political and defence information, are of high value to foreign agents wishing to conduct espionage, influence or sabotage operations.

An Garda Siochana works very closely with Interpol and Europol to identify and eliminate the threats posed.

"Cyber security is a multi-faceted problem and the threat picture must consider a whole range of actors and capabilities," said the Tuosist native who is now based in Dublin.

He noted that the threat can come from nation state actors with vast resources and budgets, cyber-criminals intent on causing damage and carrying out extortion and large scale fraudulent activity, activists who wish to make political statements and young technical literate people wishing to experiment for fun, financial gain or technical curiosity.

"The often repeated mantra is that cyber security is a team sport and the liaison between multiple organisations and the process of sharing information which is sensitive is paramount," the senior Garda officer said.