

Internet Drug Dealers Get Hefty Prison Terms in Russia

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September 30, 2014

The  Moscow Times

Nine drug dealers offering round-the-clock sales of synthetic marijuana in the Moscow region were sentenced to lengthy prison terms Tuesday.

The mastermind of the group got 15 years behind bars, while the remaining members got between 8 1/2 and 12 years, Interfax reported, citing a spokesman for the Federal Drug Control Service.

The group had been purchasing smoking blends from China and having them delivered to Moscow, where they sold the substances over the Internet and even sent shipments to "clients" in the regions, the report said.

"With the aim of searching for and expanding their client base, two websites were set up to provide information on their range of products, a price list, contact information, ways of acquiring the products and payment," the spokesman was citing as saying.

The group's sentencing comes as authorities in the Kirov and Khanty-Mansiisk regions investigate several deaths believed to have been caused by synthetic marijuana.

Six residents of the Khanty-Mansiisk region died last week after ingesting an unknown substance believed to have been synthetic marijuana, and several people in Kirov suffered the same fate a week earlier.

As of Tuesday, a total of 13 people had died as a result of the two separate cases of mass poisoning, Interfax reported. Several suspects have been detained in connection with the distribution of the drug that caused the deaths, though their identities have not been disclosed.

Smoking blends, usually sold as synthetic marijuana or "Spice," have been banned in Russia and the most common ingredients added onto a list of prohibited substances. But they have proven to be a headache for anti-drug officials, since new compounds can be synthesized to allow drug dealers to sidestep the list of banned substances.

According to Interfax, the substance that caused the deaths in Kirov and Khanty-Mansiisk was one such new compound.

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Original url:

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