

Hackers urged not to deface Middle Eastern sites

SAN FRANCISCO (Reuters) — Cyberangels, an offshoot of the Guardian Angels groups that patrol city neighborhoods to prevent crime, has launched an effort to protect the Internet from hackers angry at Saudi-born militant Osama bin Laden, the prime suspect in the Sept. 11 attacks on New York and Washington. Cyberangels was formed in 1995 by the New York City-based Guardian Angels, whose members patrol streets and subways in their distinctive red berets. The group helps find and report child pornography Web sites, aids victims of cyberstalking and helps parents locate runaways.

Now the group has produced a series of televised public service ads, set to begin airing next week, aimed at convincing computer hackers to stop defacing Web sites they find objectionable. In addition to being illegal, Cyberangels says such activity is unproductive and unethical, amounting to vandalism.

"Some groups, trying to lash out or be patriotic or just angry, have been defacing Middle Eastern Web sites without realizing that only hurts the Internet," Parry Aftab, executive director of Cyberangels said Thursday.

In the public service announcements, taped Wednesday, Aftab and Vinton Cerf, senior vice president at WorldCom and former chairman of the Internet Society, call on hackers to stop defacing Web sites.

"Protect the Internet; don't try to attack it," the spot says. "A true hacker only defends the Internet, builds it and improves it."

Shortly after the attacks, some hackers managed to take the Presidential Palace of Afghanistan offline. Other Web sites related to Afghanistan's Taliban government, which has so far refused to hand bin Laden over to the authorities, were plastered with mock "Wanted" posters of the Saudi exile.

"The Internet was absolutely essential to our recovery from the attacks and it's important that we keep it strong," Aftab said. "As we look at the Net to make sure we are secure as a country, that's hard to do with all these pranks that are being played."

Many of the hackers are probably "bored" teenagers, but they should find more productive ways to work through their anger, Aftab said.

"Whatever they're doing is inappropriate under all circumstances and we need to put them to work doing the right stuff," she said.

The group's Web site promotes several ways for computer users to respond to the attacks, including helping families search for information about loved ones who remain missing or spreading scam alerts about phony charities seeking donations. The group also is looking for computer experts to help with its own technical needs.

Last week the Germany-based Chaos Computer Club issued a similar statement urging other hackers to resist the temptation to strike out against anyone online in retaliation for the attacks on the USA.