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PHILADELPHIA MAN SENTENCED TO LIFE IN PRISON FOR ADVERTISING, TRANSPORTING, RECEIVING AND POSSESSING CHILD PORNOGRAPHY

WASHINGTON – Robert P. Merz was sentenced to life in prison today for advertising, transporting, receiving and possessing child pornography, Assistant Attorney General of the Criminal Division Lanny A. Breuer and U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania Michael L. Levy announced.

Merz, 45, of Philadelphia, was charged in a third superseding indictment on Oct. 23, 2008. He was convicted of all charges following a three-day trial before U.S. District Judge Juan R. Sanchez in May 2009. Merz had two prior Pennsylvania state convictions for the molestation of two young girls on separate occasions, making him eligible for the life sentence.

Evidence presented at trial established that Merz's home was searched in February 2007, and computers, DVDs and CDs were seized. Trial evidence showed that upon review of the seized materials, investigators discovered hundreds of thousands of images and videos depicting the sexual abuse of minors as young as toddlers. Some of the images depicted violent sexual acts being committed against the victims.

In addition, evidence introduced at trial revealed that Merz used numerous online technologies to receive and transport the images. Investigators testified at trial that Merz created and administered an online group that was dedicated to trading images and videos depicting the sexual abuse of minors. The private online group had members from around the world who were handpicked by Merz. The investigators testified that the group could only be accessed using a password and was established not only to trade images and videos of minors, but also so members could talk about their common sexual interest in children.

This online group was identified through Operation "Joint Hammer," the U.S. component of "Operation Koala," an ongoing operation involving 28 countries targeting transnational rings of child pornographers that was initiated by Europol and Eurojust.

The case was investigated by the FBI and the U.S. Postal Inspection Service. It is being prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorneys Roberta Benjamin and Kevin Brenner of the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania and Trial Attorney Steve Grocki of the Criminal Division's Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section (CEOS). Computer forensics in the case were performed by CEOS' High Technology Investigative Unit.

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