

‘Grabber’ nabbed in big sting

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Johannesburg - Two men believed that they had found a buyer for a machine nicknamed The Grabber, but their “clients” were undercover intelligence operatives.



The cellphone-tapping machine worth over R25 million.
(Credit: SUPPLIED)

At 10am on Friday, the duo were lured to Irene Mall outside Pretoria in a police and intelligence sting that resulted in their arrest for illegally being in possession of the cellphone-tapping, -tracking and -locator machine worth over R25 million.

The machine, specially installed in a German-made multi-purpose vehicle, was impounded.

The Star knows the identity of the two arrested men - a top businessman in the gold industry and a bank employee -but can only identify them once they have appeared in court. They were due in court on Monday.

Hawks spokesman Hangwani Mulaudzi confirmed the arrests and said more were imminent.

The Grabber, manufactured in Israel, can be used to intercept highly confidential national security information and sell it or exchange it with political enemies.

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Police sources told The Star that evidence showed The Grabber, which could bug at least 10 000 lines at a time, had been used to advance certain parties in commercial transactions.

In one case, The Grabber had allegedly been used to bug and track members of the bid adjudication committee of the Airports Company of South Africa, which decides on contracts worth hundreds of millions.

The men are believed to have used the information to influence and blackmail people who were involved in the tender.

Sources revealed that the arrest of the men followed concern that the equipment would be used to help the syndicate win billions in government tenders and compromise national security.

An intelligence operative who wished to remain anonymous warned: “This is a serious security threat. Only certain people are authorised to use this machine. No ordinary citizen is supposed to be in possession of this device.”

The acquisition of the machine – first-generation Mobile GSM tracking and locating equipment – is highly regulated, internationally and in South Africa.

In South Africa, it belongs to a category of special equipment – used in the interest of national security – and can only be bought with special presidential authority.

The Star understands that the equipment was bought using a fraudulently acquired letter of authority from the South African government and was paid for by money from a private trust owned by a local businessman, but managed by an attorney based in the Free State.

Information at The Star’s disposal indicates that the machine was first installed in a specially bought BMW X5 and was removed and installed into a Mercedes Benz Viano because it was bigger.

In court, the men are expected to face a raft of charges which relate to crimes against the state.

They also are expected to face charges of illegally bringing the machine into the country in violation of the Rica Act.

Crimes committed in violation of this law carry a minimum sentence of 10 years and a fine of R2 million.

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