AUSTRALIANS are being targeted by Eastern European organised crime families using the internet to extort and steal far from home.

Delegates at the annual AusCERT Asia Pacific Internet Security Conference on the Gold Coast were warned today that mobsters were hiring computer programmers to take their brand of criminal activity online.

The deputy head of Britain's National Hi-Tech Crime Unit, Superintendent Mick Deats, said one Eastern European syndicate with interests in prostitution, drugs and gun smuggling was also earning money all over the world from internet credit card fraud, software piracy, child pornography and online extortion.

"This particular group, to our knowledge so far, employ 10 programmers," he said.

For several months, Australian law enforcement officers have been in the UK as part of a joint investigation into the syndicate after it targeted banks in Australia using a method known as "phishing" - the mass delivery of unsolicited emails to discover bank account details.

"Australia is a focus of a lot of the phishing activity at the moment," Supt Deats said.

"The people we've arrested in London were sending money to the same people that are receiving money from attacks that are happening in Australia."

Another tactic linked to several eastern European crime syndicates was bombarding internet businesses with a flood of requests aimed at overloading systems and shutting them down.

The businesses were then told to pay $50,000 to make the attacks go away, he said.

"This is a 21st century equivalent of the good old protection racket. We're seeing the electronic version of a very old crime."

The four day conference has highlighted the increased threat to computer systems from hackers and the rising cost of attacks in Australia in the past year.

American psychologist Max Kilger said hackers no longer fitted a typical stereotype.

"The hacker stereotypes are long gone," he said.

"They are pretty much like you and me except they have this passionate love of technology and computers and networking and it takes over a lot of their life."

AAP