

Woman who 'duped' Sotto's wife falls

NBI also nabs text scam gang with Binay daughter's help

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Agents of the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) arrested five suspected con artists in separate operations on Tuesday and Wednesday in Manila and Parañaque City.

Four of the suspects were allegedly involved in a "call-and-text scam," where one of them posed either as Executive Secretary Paquito Ochoa Jr. or Vice President Jejomar Binay.

The fifth arrested suspect was a woman who allegedly issued bouncing checks after tricking the wife of Sen. Vicente Sotto III and a celebrity stylist into selling her their jewelry worth P15 million.

NBI Foreign Liaison Division (FLD) chief Claro de Castro Jr. identified the members of the call-and-text scam syndicate as Vimbie Avilla, alias Salbakuta; Aldwin Fadriquela; Jericho Guzman; and Gabriel Balingit dela Cruz.

De Castro said they were caught in an entrapment operation late Tuesday afternoon at a bank in Manila when they tried to withdraw a "donation" made by a poseur donor worth P300,000. The money was meant for the so-called PNOY Foundation, the VP Binay Foundation, and the Philippine Charity Sweepstakes Office (PCSO), which they claimed to represent.

The arrest, De Castro said, was made in coordination with the security group of Globe Telecommunications following complaints from several high-profile personalities whose names were being used by syndicate.

The NBI-FLD chief said his men cornered the group after Avilla posed as Binay and called up business tycoon Lucio Tan for donations and gave a bank account number where the money could be deposited.

The scam was revealed after a member of Tan's staff called the Office of the Vice President to double check.

De Castro said Binay's daughter Ann played a role in the operation by pretending to be Tan's secretary and keeping in touch with Avilla regarding the P300,000 deposit.

Avilla and his cohorts remain in NBI custody and face charges of usurpation of authority and attempted estafa.

In another case, the NBI's Reaction, Arrest and Interdiction Division (RAID) on Wednesday arrested 40-year-old Francesca Santiago at her residence on Zobel Street, BF Homes, Parañaque City, for allegedly issuing bouncing checks to Senator Sotto's celebrity wife, Helen Gamboa, and stylist Eric Pe Benito.

A complaint from Gamboa claimed that Santiago issued bouncing checks to make an initial payment of P4.5 million for the P8-million worth of jewelry that the suspect bought from her.

Benito, on the other hand, said Santiago also did the same to him after buying jewelry worth P7 million. Santiago was arrested by virtue of a warrant of arrest issued by Quezon City Metropolitan Trial Court – Branch 39.

NBI-RAID head agent Ross Jonathan Galicia said Santiago first befriended her prospective victims before offering to buy their jewelry, and that she worked in cahoots with her husband, Benjamin, now also the subject of a manhunt.

The couple had been allegedly engaged in this racket since 2006, he said.

Galicia called on Santiago's other victims to come forward and file a formal complaint.