

News story: Royal Navy leads international efforts to seize drugs worth £400M

The UK and France commanded a multinational naval task force which has scored eight drugs busts over the period, seizing 1.75 tonnes of narcotics worth nearly £400m, including 265kg of heroin and 455kg of hashish worth £65m by the Royal Navy Type 23 frigate, HMS Monmouth.

Since April, British, French, US and Australian warships in Combined Task Force 150 (CTF150) took part in Operation Southern Surge to counter narcotics trafficking, which funds terrorism in the region, scoring eight drugs busts.

The naval task force polices more than three million square miles of sea in order to track down vessels smuggling drugs and weapons, as well as providing reassurance to ships using the international waters. The multinational coalition is also focused on deterring and denying maritime terrorist activity in the region, which includes some of the world's most vital trade routes such as the Suez Canal and Bab Al Mandeb Strait. The headquarters of CTF150 has been made up of 24 British and French sailors and commanded by French Rear Admiral Olivier Lebas.

Defence Secretary Sir Michael Fallon said:

The success of this joint task force with our French allies is a demonstration of Britain's firm commitment to global maritime security and our ability to work with European allies to tackle the threat from drug smuggling.

The money made from these nefarious criminal activities fund the terrorists who threaten us at home and abroad. As we leave the EU we will continue to work alongside our allies to tackle smuggling in the region and maintain the free flow of shipping.

Deputy Commander Combined Task Force 150, Royal Navy Captain Paul Pitcher, said:

The deployment of a combined French-UK staff has successfully demonstrated French-UK naval integration in an operational maritime environment. The ships under our command have enjoyed considerable success in seizing illegal drugs at sea, as well as providing naval presence to reassure the shipping community in and around the strategic chokepoint of the Bab Al Mandeb Strait.

The Franco-British team has been directing operations since April after taking over from the Canadian Navy, and has just passed on command to the Pakistan Navy. Navies from the Combined Maritime Forces, a coalition of 31 nations, take it in turns to lead the task force either from a command ship or the headquarters in Bahrain.

The Combined Task Force joint command is the latest in a series of shared commitments undertaken by the UK and France, demonstrating the enduring closeness of the two nations' defence relationship.

Earlier this year, around 60 Royal Navy and Royal Marine personnel joined a French naval deployment to the Indian Ocean and Far East, while British and French forces routinely operate together as allies in the Global Coalition and NATO. This year, France is also contributing to the ongoing UK-led NATO enhanced Forward Presence deployment to Estonia.

[News story: Tough new measures to protect savers from pension scams](#)

The government has today (20 August 2017) confirmed new measures to protect private pension savers from the threat of unscrupulous pension scammers.

The measures will include:

- a ban on cold calling in relation to pensions, including emails and text messages
- a tightening of HMRC rules to stop scammers opening fraudulent pension schemes
- tougher actions to help prevent the transfer of money from occupational pension schemes into fraudulent ones

The cold calling ban will be enforced by the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO).

The government is also tackling scammers by ensuring that only active companies, which produce regular, up-to-date accounts, can register pension schemes. Limiting transfers of pension pots from one occupational scheme to another will mean trustees must check their receiving scheme is regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority, or has an active employment link with the individual, or is an authorised master trust.

The announcement comes as new figures released today show almost £5 million was obtained by pension scammers in the first five months of 2017. It is estimated that £43 million has also been unlawfully obtained by scammers since April 2014, with those targeted having lost an average of nearly £15,000, as scammers try to encourage savers to part with their money with

false promises of low-risk, high-return investment opportunities.

Minister for Pensions and Financial Inclusion Guy Opperman said:

Today's figures highlight the extent to which people's savings are being targeted and stolen through elaborate hoaxes – leaving them with little opportunity to build up their savings again. That is why we are introducing tough new measures for those who scam.

If people have saved for a private pension, we want to protect them. This is the biggest lifesaving that individuals normally make over many years of hard work. By tackling these scammers, people should know that cold calling, apart from exceptional circumstances, is banned.

Economic Secretary to the Treasury Stephen Barclay said:

It's utterly unacceptable that people who have worked all their lives to build up a pension pot should be subject to scams which may leave them out of pocket.

Pensions are often the most valuable asset a person has upon reaching retirement – and that's why we are determined to crack down on scammers and protect our hardworking savers.

[Press release: ICC Arrest Warrant for Major Mahmoud al-Werfalli in Libya: Joint Statement on Libya by the Governments of France, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America](#)

Joint Statement on the ICC Arrest Warrant for Major Mahmoud al-Werfalli in Libya

The governments of France, the United Kingdom, and the United States welcome the announcement on August 17 by the Libya National Army (LNA) that it will investigate reports of unlawful killings in Benghazi. We note that the LNA

has recognized the arrest warrant by the International Criminal Court prosecutor for a member of the LNA, Major al-Werfalli and are encouraged by the LNA's decision to suspend Major al-Werfalli pending an investigation. We call on the LNA to ensure that the investigation is carried out fully and fairly; and those responsible for the unlawful killings are held to account.

We are monitoring ongoing acts of conflict in Libya closely. Those suspected of committing, ordering, or failing to prevent unlawful killings and torture on all sides must be fully investigated and held accountable, as appropriate. We will continue our efforts at the international level to pursue appropriate action against those who are complicit in violations of international human rights law or international humanitarian law, whatever their affiliation. We consider that it is in Libya's interest to be able to rely on unified security forces responsible for the country's security and acting within the framework of Libya's laws and respecting international law.

The governments of France, the United Kingdom, and the United States also reaffirm their support for the Government of National Accord. We underscore the importance of the United Nations' central role in facilitating Libyan-led political dialogue, welcome the appointment of the new Special Representative of the Secretary-General Ghassan Salamé, and look forward to supporting his efforts to facilitate a political solution in Libya.

Press release: Minister appalled by developments in Venezuela

I am utterly appalled by the decision of the sham-democratic Constituent Assembly in Venezuela to remove legislative powers from the elected National Assembly. This is a shocking blow to democracy in Venezuela, and a direct attack on a legitimate democratic institution. It ignores the will of the Venezuelan people and will only further undermine confidence in Venezuela's democracy. The National Assembly and its Deputies must be respected and their rights honoured.

Poverty in Venezuela continues to rise, with more Venezuelans being forced into poverty every day by bad governance. This is a tragedy in a country with such enormous resources. This move will do nothing to tackle the urgent economic challenges that ordinary Venezuelans face

It is time for President Maduro and the Venezuelan Government to act responsibly. They need to reduce tension, respect democracy, and take responsibility for working with the Opposition to agree a positive way forward for all Venezuelans. The UK stands with the people of Venezuela and will work with international partners in our collective response to the gravity of this situation

[News story: One million Help to Buy: ISAs opened](#)

More than one million [Help to Buy: ISAs](#) have now been opened, helping first-time buyers across the UK save towards their first home. First-time buyers have saved over £1.8 billion in their ISAs.

Economic Secretary to the Treasury, Stephen Barclay, said:

Reaching the landmark of one million [Help to Buy: ISAs](#) shows the product's success in helping first-time buyers save towards a home.

Our [Help to Buy schemes](#) continue to prove hugely popular across the country, as we support people to get on in life and achieve their dream of climbing the housing ladder.

The government's [Help to Buy: ISA](#) scheme was launched on 1 December 2015 to provide first-time buyers the opportunity to save up to £200 a month with the government topping up their contributions by 25%, up to a maximum of £3,000.

First-time house buyers across the UK can open an [ISA](#), which is available for home purchases up to £250,000 (£450,000 in London). If you plan to buy a home with someone who also qualifies, you are each able to separately claim the bonuses on your savings and put both towards the home you are buying.

The scheme has proven to be hugely popular, with the equivalent of 1,500 [Help to Buy: ISAs](#) being opened every day since its introduction. The number of providers of the scheme, which includes banks, building societies and credit unions, has doubled since its launch to 28, with the Nottingham Building Society being the most recent to sign up.

Savings in a [Help to Buy: ISA](#) are tax-free and are also quick and easy to open. Savers can receive on average 2.4% interest rate on their savings which is typically higher than an instant access savings account.

First-time buyers will be able to open a [Help to buy: ISA](#) until 30 November 2019. Existing account holders can continue to save in their ISA account until 30 November 2029 when accounts will close to additional contributions. Bonuses can be claimed until 1 December 2030.