

Press release: Eleven arrests from investigation into suspected international people smuggling

The UK element of the operation was led by officers from Immigration Enforcement Criminal and Financial Investigation and all the individuals were arrested on suspicion of assisting illegal immigration.

The individuals are believed to be part of an organised criminal network that transported individuals, predominantly from Afghanistan, across Europe and into the UK. The smuggling attempts often involved migrants being concealed in specially adapted vehicles.

Today's arrest operation, which forms part of a wider international law enforcement joint investigation, was supported by officers from the National Crime Agency (NCA) and international partners from Europol and Eurojust (the EU agency tasked with strengthening judicial co-ordination on serious cross-border organised crime).

A breakdown of the arrests is as follows:

Seven individuals in London, two in Birmingham and two in Gateshead on suspicion of assisting illegal immigration. A further individual was arrested in London for suspected immigration offences.

There were also 7 arrests in Bulgaria and 8 in Belgium on suspicion of assisting illegal immigration.

Steve Dann, Director, Criminal & Financial Investigation said:

This international investigation is targeting an organised network suspected of being involved in a systematic attempt to evade the UK's immigration controls.

People smuggling is a cruel and dangerous trade in which often vulnerable individuals are treated as commodities. Many are passed into the hands of other crime gangs who would seek to exploit them for modern slavery purposes – including labour exploitation and the illicit sex trade.

We have been working closely with law enforcement colleagues across Europe and that vital co-operation will continue as the investigation proceeds with the evidence we have seized today.

The NCA's Chris Hogben, deputy head of the Invigor taskforce, said:

Criminal gangs often facilitate the arrival of illegal migrants into the UK by exploiting their desperation without thought for safety and with the sole motive of profit.

We see this through migrants being sent across the channel in unseaworthy small boats or stuffed into the back of cramped lorries, vans and cars.

This operation is a good example of how we can bring together law enforcement from across Europe to work together to take on that threat and disrupt the organised networks involved in people smuggling.

This investigation falls under Project Invigor, the UK's Organised Immigration Crime Taskforce that targets the criminal networks behind people smuggling. Partners include the National Crime Agency, Immigration Enforcement, Border Force and the Crown Prosecution Service, working in the UK and internationally.

Anyone with information about suspected immigration abuse can contact Crimestoppers on 0800 555 111 anonymously or visit <http://www.crimestoppers-uk.org>.