

Smuggling gang sentenced after locking migrants into wardrobe 'hides'

Five men who smuggled 35 people to the UK, including children as young as two years old and an individual with physical disabilities, have been sentenced to a total of 24 years and two months.

Following a trial at Reading Crown Court yesterday, Monday 9 May, the court heard that between August and October 2019, Paramjeet Singh Baweja, 50, and Viljit Singh Khurana, 45, organised the smuggling of 35 Afghan migrants into the country through six separate events. Individuals were screwed into purpose-built hides made from wardrobes, which were surrounded by furniture items in the rear of the vans. The vans were driven through Europe to Southern UK ports, including Dover and Portsmouth.

The coffin-like hides, from which the migrants had no way of escaping without the assistance of the organised crime group, were used to conceal up to seven people each journey. Many were only discovered after they had endured travel from Belgium and France, through the ports and across the Channel. One group were discovered while shouting for their lives at the point of being loaded onto a recovery vehicle.

Following a two-year investigation by Home Office's Criminal Financial Investigations (CFI) unit, Baweja and Khurana pleaded guilty to the purchasing of vans and furniture, communicating between the 'minders', the migrants and Romanian drivers and paying money to the 'minders'. Baweja was sentenced to six years and nine months' imprisonment. Khurana received a six-year sentence.

The 'minders' were found to be Harmohan Singh, 41, and Manmohan Singh Wadhwa, 57. Both admitted to escorting the vans and drivers during the facilitation events and providing progress updates to other members of the crime group and drivers. Both Singh and Wadhwa were sentenced to three years and four months in jail.

Forensic evidence indicated that Harmohan Singh was also involved in the screwing of the migrants into the hides in the wardrobes.

The final individual sentenced was Dumitru Bacelan, 29, a Romanian national, believed to be of higher 'rank' than the minders and drivers. Bacelan pleaded guilty to his part of the recruitment and the organising of drivers. This included booking hotels and travel around the UK and Europe with other gang members.

He also pleaded guilty to fraud by false representation in relation to an EUSS application he submitted to the Home Office. He has been sentenced to three years and nine months' imprisonment for immigration offences, and 12 months for fraud offences to run concurrently.

Minister for Justice and Tackling Illegal Migration, Tom Pursglove MP said:

These life-threatening attempts to smuggle people, including very young children, into the UK in the back of vehicles with room to barely move or breathe, is quite frankly, horrific.

I would like to praise the officers on the case in their efforts working round the clock to prevent this illegal activity which put people's lives in extreme danger.

The Nationality and Borders Act will support our criminal investigations teams by making it easier to prosecute people smugglers and introducing a maximum sentence of life imprisonment for those who facilitate illegal entry into our country.

Deputy Director for Immigration Enforcement's Criminal Financial Investigations, Ben Thomas said:

Criminal gangs should be in no doubt of our determination to investigate, catch and pursue anyone attempting to bring people here unlawfully and in such atrocious conditions.

The operation run by this criminal group put children and vulnerable people's lives in danger for the sake of making a profit. I hope these sentencings send a powerful message that breaking the law and putting individuals' lives at risk will not go unpunished.

Our CFI teams along with wider Immigration Enforcement, Border Force officials and key partners including the police, NCA and European counterparts, work 24/7 to catch those putting people lives at risk through people smuggling.

Since 2020, CFI have secured over 140 convictions relating to people smuggling cases involving vehicles such as vans, lorries, cars and yachts, as well as 49 small boats-related prosecutions. This equates to a combined total of nearly 400 years in prosecutions since 2020.

To anonymously report suspicious or suspect people smuggling activity contact CrimeStoppers on 0800 555 111, or in an emergency, by dialling 999. [Find out more on the Crimestoppers website.](#)