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- Criminal network of an international gang of smugglers dismantled -

In the fight against international human smuggling, the judicial and police authorities achieved a great success. In a transnational operation across several states in Germany, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, a total of 39 suspected smugglers, including their supporters were arrested. Within all of the police actions, 52 objects were searched. The accused members of one of the leading criminal networks involved in migrant smuggling, are suspected of having smuggled around 10,000 people/migrants across the English Channel in inflatable boats over the past 12 to 18 months. The operation targeted particularly the heads of this organised criminal network, as well as the illegal funds derived from those crimes. This joined action day was coordinated by Eurojust and Europol.

In Germany alone, due to the very close cooperation of the joint investigation team named "GEG Elise" (a composition of federal police and state police in Osnabrück), the police arrested 18 people demanded by a legal assistance request by the Belgian and French authorities. Under the general direction of the public prosecutor's office Osnabrück they searched 36 objects. Most of the arrests were implemented by special police forces. The accused between the ages of 22 and 54 are either currently in custody or are to be presented to a magistrate in the near future. Numerous pieces of evidence, including 119 inflatable boats, 33 outboard motors, 966 life jackets, 64 mobile phones/tablets and around 27,000 euros in cash were confiscated during those searches mentioned above.

Over 900 officers and several other service members -provided by Federal Police and State police, particularly officers from the Osnabrück Police Headquarters, as well as other state police forces- were on duty yesterday. They acted in four federal states, namely Lower Saxony, Bremen, North Rhine-Westphalia and Baden-Württemberg. In addition, neighbouring authorities and organizations, such as the Federal Agency for Technical Relief, provided their support.

Quotes

Michael Maßmann, President of the Osnabrück Police Headquarters, on the successful operation:

“A police operation of this magnitude is something special for all of us, because an operation of this size does not happen on regularly basis. I am pleased that this Europe-wide campaign was very successful and that those criminals who shamelessly exploited the predicament of those people seeking for help and guidance were put to an end. A good day for law enforcement and the law itself, and those seeking for protection.

Bernard Südbeck (Chief Public Prosecutor of the Osnabrück Public Prosecutor's Office):

“The perpetrators of human smuggling are not concerned with the welfare and safety of desperate people. Transporting them only maximises their own profits, and they are willing doing so at any cost. The rule of law must resolutely oppose this unscrupulous exploitation of people in need and those seeking for help. Smuggling crime does not stop at national borders. Therefore, this must also apply to prosecution. I am delighted that the judicial and police authorities have succeeded in shattering a big smuggling network with this transnational and cross-border operation, in which the public prosecutor’s (district attorney’s) office of Osnabrück has taken a leading role for Germany.”

Präsident Przybyla, Bundespolizeidirektion Hannover:

“This is a significant success in the fight against migrant smuggling. As a result of intensive investigations with our partners from Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, France and Great Britain, today's police measures have dismantled a criminal network that has personally enriched itself from the fate of refugees and has unscrupulously accepted the deaths of people. The professional and trusting cooperation between the German Federal Police and the Police Lower Saxony made a significant contribution to the success of this operation.”

Those arrested in Germany are suspected of being involved in the commercial and gang-based smuggling of foreigners. Due to the intensive investigations by "GEG Elise" and findings from investigative procedures the accused are suspected to be members of an internationally networked Iraqi-Kurdish smugglers' group.

This group is involved in smuggling boats from France and Belgium across the English Channel to other foreign smugglers wanting to enter the border of the United Kingdom. The perpetrators had the logistical task of procuring inflatable boats and other nautical material, storing them and then, with the involvement of other smugglers, taking to the French and Belgian North Sea coast.

After several months of investigative work, the professionally acting criminal network was broken up with yesterday's action. A great success thanks to the close cooperation between the Osnabrück public prosecutor's office, the federal police and the police Osnabrück.

During the time of investigation, twelve transports of nautical material by motor vehicle from two storage facilities in Hanover and Bielefeld to Belgium and France were detected. Further investigations led to the localization of storage sites for nautical material in Osnabrück, Lotte,

Hannover and Bielefeld. Based on the information provided by the German authorities, the investigators in Belgium and France succeeded in preventing a transport of nautical material in the form of eleven inflatable boats, 12 outboard motors, 19 fuel canisters, more than 307 life jackets and a boat tank -used for seaway across the English Channel-. A total of 18 vehicle occupants of the transport vehicles used, were arrested.

The smuggling group mentioned above is also allegedly connected to an attempted homicide on November 13th in 2021 in Osnabrück, in which an Iraqi national was seriously injured by a firearm with several shots in his lower body part. The victim is currently no longer in mortal danger and has been discharged from the hospital. It is suspected that this was an act of revenge for another incident taking place in a refugee camp in France in September 2021, in which another member of the smuggling network was shot and wounded.

Background:

Since mid-January 2022, the GEG "Elise" has been investigating several Iraqi nationals on suspicion of smuggling of foreigners.

Eurojust set up a coordination center in The Hague for the so-called Common Action Day (CAD) on 5th July to enable rapid cooperation between the judicial authorities involved. The Agency organized four coordination meetings to facilitate judicial cooperation and the preparation of the common day of action on the 5th of July. Europol supported the operation by facilitating the exchange of information, organizing operational meetings and providing analytical support.

The successful Europe-wide action impressively shows excellent investigative results that were achieved in particular through cross-border cooperation and an exchange of information. These investigative methods are essential for combating this growing form of human trafficking. The influx of migrants into the European Union is accompanied by degrading human smuggling procedures. Smugglers are often involved in international criminal organizations and their activities endanger human lives. The risky sea crossings and transits regularly lead to casualties / endangered victims.

