

Many of 39 found dead in UK lorry were Vietnamese victims of people traffickers

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28 October 2019

More details have emerged about the horrific deaths of 39 migrants, whose bodies were found last Wednesday in the back of a refrigerated lorry trailer in an industrial estate in Grays, southern England.

The 31 men and 8 women (including a teenager) were all pronounced dead at the scene. The driver of the lorry, 25-year-old Maurice Robinson picked up the container in the Essex port of Purfleet, after traveling from Northern Ireland. He is charged with 39 counts of manslaughter, conspiracy to traffic people, conspiracy to assist unlawful immigration and money laundering. He will appear in court today.

Reports claim that the lorry in which the 39 died was part of a convoy of three vehicles, transporting around 100 people. The movements of the lorry prior to its arrival in Britain are yet to be fully established, but before making its final trek from the Belgian port of Zeebrugge to Purfleet, the container also travelled to Dunkirk and Lille in France, and Bruges in Belgium.

Others arrested include a 23-year-old man from Northern Ireland, detained in Zeebrugge on Saturday. He is said to be the haulier who delivered the trailer to Zeebrugge later found in Essex with the 39 bodies inside.

On Sunday, police bailed three people arrested on Friday—a 38-year-old man and 38-year-old woman both detained in Warrington in England and a 46-year-old man from Northern Ireland.

According to reports over the last several days, most if not all of those who died were Vietnamese, not Chinese as first widely reported. The state-run VNExpress reported at the weekend, “12 more fearful families have reported their loved ones missing following 39 people found dead in a refrigerated truck in the UK. Seven families in Ha Tinh Province and five in Nghe An Province, both in central Vietnam, reported

Saturday that their children were missing in the UK since last Wednesday...” It added, “Of the seven families, five are in Thien Loc Commune and one each in Thanh Loc and Vinh Loc communes.”

Vietnamese ambassador to the UK, Tran Ngoc An, held talks with Home Secretary Priti Patel on Friday night, after which she met investigators from the National Crime Agency and Essex Police. A hotline for families to make contact about the deaths opened at the Vietnamese Embassy in London.

One can only imagine the appalling circumstances in which these people died, entombed in a dark container, that could have been refrigerated to temperatures of minus 25, suffocating as their air ran out. Millions internationally were shocked when reading the final text messages to her mother of 26-year-old Pham Thi Tra My, who sent a message at the time the container was being shipped from Belgium to the UK at 10:28 p.m. Tuesday (UK time) and has not been heard from since. The message read: “I’m sorry Mom. My path to abroad doesn’t succeed. Mom, I love you so much! I’m dying bcoz I can’t breath... I’m from Nghen, Can Loc, Ha Tinh, Vietnam ... I am sorry, Mom.” The bodies of the victims were found just three hours later.

The trafficking of people from Asia to Europe is big business. The BBC reported that “Ms Tra My’s brother, Pham Ngoc Tuan, said some of the £30,000 charge for getting his sister to the UK had been paid to people smugglers and her last-known location had been Belgium.”

Pham Thi Tra My came from Ha Tinh province. That many have left this area is no surprise. The province has been virtually destroyed by the ravages of capitalism. In 2016, a chemical spill from a steel factory resulted in the worst ever environmental disaster the country has seen. Up to 125 miles of

coastline was impacted, with the local fishing industry ruined.

Many such as Pham Thi Tra My leave Vietnam and other poor countries in search of a better life in Europe, but end up in a worse situation than the grinding poverty they tried to escape from.

They end up in conditions of slavery in Europe, while their families remain in debt for years—having paid vast sums to a trafficker. Three anti-trafficking charities produced a report earlier this year finding that it costs Vietnamese people between \$10,000 and \$40,000 to travel to Europe. Females who make the dangerous journey successfully often end up working in nail bars which have sprouted up all over Britain. Many males end up working long hours on cannabis farms or employed in backbreaking work in the hand car washing industry or on building sites. Both sexes fall victim to prostitution.

According to figures compiled by the UK's National Crime Agency, nationals from Albania, China and Vietnam are the most commonly reported victims of adult slavery. The NCA passes on information to the national referral mechanism (NRM), under which victims of slavery are identified. In 2017, 5,145 potential victims of slavery in the UK were referred to the NRM, an increase of 35 percent on 2016 figures. The *Guardian* noted that between April and June this year, 1,658 victims who were enslaved in the UK “were identified from 81 different countries; 58% (955) were adults and 42% (703) children.”

The government plays down the extent of slavery in the UK, but even its own figure states that there may be as many as 13,000 slaves in Britain. The Global Slavery Index, whose survey found that there are almost 41 million people internationally who exist under conditions of slavery, estimates that 136,000 slaves are in fact working in Britain, the world's fifth richest country.

Just how brutal are the conditions faced by those trafficked is indicated thanks to the prosecution of Thu Huong Nguyen, known as Jenny, and Viet Hoang Nguyen, known as Ken, owners of Nail Bar Deluxe in the city of Bath. In 2016, police and immigration officers found two Vietnamese girls aged under 18 working there. Both worked 60 hours a week. One was paid about £30 a month (£7.50 a week). The second was not paid at all. They lived in Jenny's home in

Bath. The *Guardian* reported, “One lived in a tiny room, while the other slept on a mattress in the attic.” Such were the profits being made by the owners from their forced labour that around £60,000 in wads of £50 notes were found inside a teddy bear in the owners' home, along with a “cabinet full of designer handbags.”

The two girls also arrived in the UK in a lorry. After they were taken into foster care, they ran away. They “were re-trafficked but were traced to a nail bar in Abbey Arcade, in Burton-on-Trent, Staffordshire. Two other victims were found there.”

All this takes place despite the much-trumpeted Modern Slavery Act. The Bath nail bar slavers were eventually prosecuted under the legislation and given sentences of just a few years in prison, despite their heinous crimes.

Whoever is guilty of the deaths of the 39, those ultimately responsible are the British Conservative government and its predecessors in the Labour Party, which, under Jeremy Corbyn is pledged to anti-immigrant measures that force refugees and migrants to resort to extremely dangerous methods of entry to the UK.



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