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U.K.

British Police Probe Discovery of 39 Bodies in Truck Container

The 25-year-old driver from Northern Ireland has been arrested on suspicion of murder



Police believe the truck came from Bulgaria and entered Britain at the port of Holyhead in Wales. PHOTO: LEON NEAL/GETTY IMAGES

By James Hookway

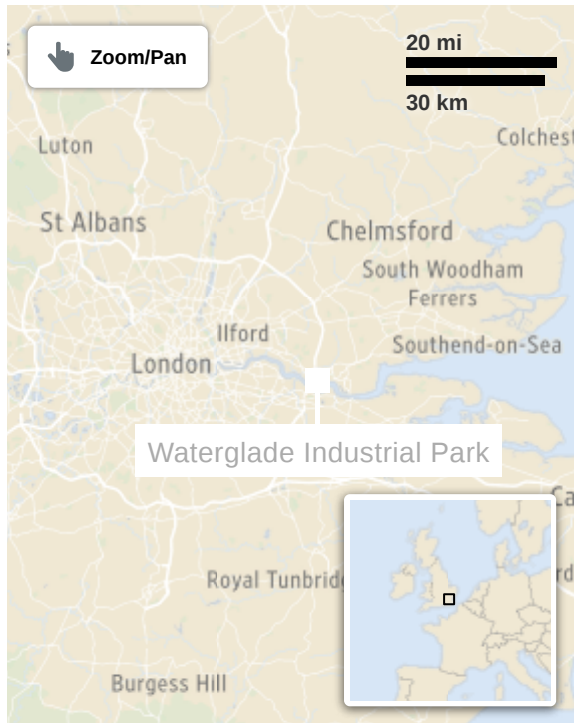
Updated Oct. 23, 2019 8:45 am ET

LONDON—British police are investigating how the bodies of 39 people wound up in a truck container at an industrial park near London, reviving longstanding concerns about the reach and practices of criminal trafficking gangs.

Essex police said they opened a murder investigation after an ambulance service alerted them to the discovery at Waterglade Industrial Park in Grays, around 16 mile east of London, shortly before 1:40 a.m. Wednesday. All 39— 38 adults and one teenager, according to early indications—were pronounced dead at the scene and the driver, who was from Northern Ireland, was arrested.

Speaking in Parliament, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said the discovery of the bodies was the result of “an appalling crime.”

“All such traders in human beings should be hunted down and brought to justice,” he said.



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Police said they are in the process of identifying the victims. Deputy Chief Constable for Essex Pippa Mills said it would likely be a lengthy process.

Authorities are also working to trace the exact route of the container to better understand what happened.

Initially, police said they believed it originated in Bulgaria, an important transshipment point for traffickers, and entered Britain on Oct. 19 at the port of Holyhead in Wales, which serves ferries and other shipping from Dublin. That prompted speculation that the truck had passed through Ireland. Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar pledged to help British authorities figure out where it had been.

“It is a real, terrible and human tragedy and we’ll carry out any investigations that are necessary if it’s established that the truck did pass through Ireland,” Mr. Varadkar told lawmakers.

Later in the afternoon, however, police said they believed the trailer traveled from Zeebrugge in Belgium to Purfleet, near Grays, and docked in the area shortly after 12.30 a.m. Wednesday.

The tractor unit is now believed to have originated in Northern Ireland, and left the port with the container and trailer shortly after 1:05 a.m.

“This will be a lengthy and complex investigation and we continue to work with local partners and international authorities to gather vital intelligence and identify those who died,” police said in a statement.

The incident is likely to refocus attention on criminal gangs trafficking people into Europe and Britain and the risks that would-be migrants take to begin a new life.

Thousands of people have died attempting to cross the Mediterranean in recent years, according to the International Organization for Migration. Their journeys can be precarious, even if they make it to land.

Earlier this year, six migrants were killed and 10 injured when a vehicle smuggling them through the north of Greece crashed into a ditch.

In 2015, Austrian police found 71 corpses in an abandoned delivery truck parked off a highway near Vienna. The victims were from Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria.

In previous years, illegal immigrants from China died trying to enter Britain; 58 Chinese nationals suffocated to death in the back of a lorry at the port of Dover in 2000.

The problem was highlighted further in 2004 when 21 illegal immigrants, again from China, drowned or succumbed to hypothermia when they were cut off by the tide when harvesting cockles in Morecombe Bay in northern England. Police investigations later showed they had entered the country through shipping containers.

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