

18 ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS DIE AFTER BEING LEFT IN TRAILER

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Body

VICTORIA, Texas -- Seventeen people were found dead Wednesday when authorities opened a sweltering, airless **trailer** that had been abandoned at a south Texas truck stop with more than 100 **illegal immigrants** locked inside.

An **18th** victim **died** later at a hospital in one of the deadliest smuggling attempts on record in the United States.

The men, women and children from Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras were apparently so desperate for air that they tried to claw through insulation on the back door.

At least one of those trapped inside placed a desperate call to police late Tuesday, saying people were suffocating and pleading with a dispatcher to "help me."

When sheriff's deputies opened the **trailer** about 2 a.m., "a flood of human beings" spilled out, U.S. Attorney Michael Shelby said. Many ran off, but others were too weak to go far.

Thirteen bodies were found inside and four more on the ground just outside. A boy, 5 or 6 years old, was among the dead.

Authorities said one of three suspected smugglers was arrested Wednesday in the Houston area, about 115 miles northeast of Victoria. The man, Tyrone Williams of Schenectady, N.Y., was not immediately charged.

The **trailer** had New York plates and was registered in Williams' name, Shelby said. Authorities were looking for two more suspects.

Asa Hutchinson, undersecretary for border and transportation security at the Department of Homeland Security, said in Washington that the agency would make investigation of the incident its highest priority.

"These ruthless criminals, who put profit before people, will be tracked down, apprehended and prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law," he said.

The smugglers apparently unhitched the **trailer** at the truck stop near Victoria, about 175 miles from the Mexican border, and drove off.

The 911 call to police in Kingsville, 100 miles south of Victoria, came in just before midnight Tuesday from a Spanish speaker on a cellular phone with lots of yelling and background noise.

Police Chief Sam Granato said the call was cut off and the number couldn't be traced. The **trailer** had arrived at the truck stop about an hour before authorities were notified.

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It was not clear how long the people had been inside, where the truck came from or where it was going. Those who **died** suffered from asphyxiation and heat stroke, health officials said, in the deadliest incident of its kind since 1987.

The National Weather Service said it was 74 degrees with 93 percent humidity at 2 a.m. The high Tuesday was 91.

The New York Times contributed to this report.

Graphic

PHOTO: ERIC GAY, ASSOCIATED PRESS

A law enforcement officer, standing beside a covered body, looks into the back of a truck **trailer** containing additional bodies while investigating the site where 17 people were found dead early Wednesday near Victoria, Texas.

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