

15 arrested in police probe of human smuggling ring: People paid up to \$40,000 U.S. for passage from South Asia, RCMP say

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Byline: Doug Schmidt

Body

A joint Canadian-U.S. police operation arrested 15 people for smuggling illegal immigrants from South Asia through Canada to the United States, police said yesterday.

The RCMP said illegal migrants from India and Pakistan paid up to \$40,000 U.S. each to be smuggled into Canada and then the United States.

They included as many as 1,000 men, women, young families and the elderly who were smuggled by truck, tractor trailer and car trunks across the border into the U.S.

Some were smuggled in boats across the St. Clair and Niagara Rivers, police said.
Citizen Special; with files from Canadian Press

Four of those arrested were from Windsor and are accused of helping the movement of illegals across the Windsor-Detroit border, said RCMP spokeswoman Michele Paradis.

The other 11 accused smugglers are from the Hamilton and Toronto areas.

The RCMP alleges the illegal migrants gained entry into Canada through airports in Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal using either forged passports or posing as tour groups.

After being taken to safe houses or hotels in the Toronto area, the illegals were smuggled across the border in Windsor, Niagara Falls and Fort Erie.

The charges include two counts each of "conspiracy to violate U.S. immigration laws" and one count each of "unlawfully participating in and-or contributing to the activities of a criminal organization."

It's the first time charges of membership in a criminal organization have ever been applied to a migrant smuggling case, RCMP Insp. Steve Martin told a news conference in Toronto.

The arrests took place early yesterday morning after a 12-month investigation by the RCMP Toronto district's immigration and passport section. Arrest warrants were issued for four others.

At 6 a.m. Monday, 75 officers from the RCMP, OPP, Toronto Police Service, Citizenship and Immigration Canada and the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service made the arrests in Windsor, Hamilton and the Greater Toronto area.

RCMP in Windsor and the U.S. Border Patrol were also part of the investigation, which revealed a core group of human smugglers in Toronto were responsible for the vast majority of South Asian migrants being smuggled into Canada and then illegally transported into the U.S.

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"This will have a huge impact," said Const. Paradis, adding yesterday's arrest "took the whole ring down" and put to an end an operation that smuggled between 100 and 1,000 illegals across the border. Dubbed Operation Oldtimer, RCMP described it as one of the top 10 smuggling-ring busts in Canadian history.

An estimated 80 per cent of those smuggled into Canada were shipped on to the U.S., investigators allege.

Three alleged smugglers were arrested in Michigan, said Bart Szafnicki, an Immigration and Naturalization Service attache with the U.S. Embassy in Ottawa. "This sends the clear message that U.S. and Canadian authorities are working co-operatively and really focusing our efforts," said Mr. Szafnicki, who added the joint hunt against human smugglers continues

Const. Paradis said RCMP met yesterday with representatives of the Indian and Pakistani communities in Canada to assure them their communities weren't being targeted, but rather those "who were taking advantage of these communities I this was a commodity."

Graphic

Photo: Rick Madonik, Toronto Star; RCMP officers bring in unidentified suspects alleged to be involved in an illegal human smuggling ring yesterday in Oakville, Ont. The smuggling operation moved illegal aliens through Canada to the U.S.

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