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Gangster behind the deadly global trade in Vietnamese migrants

From a dingy flat above a Brussels pizza parlour, Vo Van Hong charged £30,000 a time to traffic people to Europe, using a network of corrupt taxi drivers to transport them. Among his victims were some of the 39 migrants found dead in a shipping container in Essex



Vo Van Hong was arrested for his role in people smuggling operations, some of which proved fatal for his victims

NIEUWSBLAD

Dipesh Gadher, Brussels | Leonie Roderick

Time finally ran out for Vo Van Hong when police smashed down the door of his dingy flat above the Pizzeria Milano in the largely immigrant Anderlecht district of Brussels. As Hong, 45, watched from a threadbare mattress on the floor, officers discovered six passports that he used — four Vietnamese and two Chinese — at least three iPhones stuffed into a shoulder bag, and suitcases full of other people's identity papers.

For almost two years the rented property, nestled among African grocery stores and Arab eateries, had been used as a safe house for Vietnamese migrants who had been trafficked across the world and were awaiting passage to Britain.

Among its inhabitants were some of the 39 victims of the October 2019 Essex lorry tragedy. Their fate in the back of a refrigerated container made international headlines. It was the highest death toll in the UK linked to illegal immigration for nearly two decades.



The 39 Vietnamese migrants who were found dead in a refrigerated container in Essex in 2019

The dawn raid on Hong's flat seven months later was the culmination of a painstaking investigation by Belgian federal prosecutors, with the help of British police, to capture the man they believed to be at the heart of a global network trading in human misery.

They claimed Hong's gang was responsible for illegally transporting 335 Vietnamese migrants to mainland Europe from Asia, and 195 people on to the UK. The trade, according to Belgian court papers, was estimated to be worth at least £6 million.

One victim was a 15-year-old girl who was forced into prostitution in Brussels to pay her debts. Another was a 17-year-old boy who had started his journey from Vietnam by being flown to Russia under the pretence of attending the football World Cup as a fan.

Hong was "at the top of the hierarchy" and the "undisputed leader of the criminal organisation", judges concluded, as they jailed him for 15 years after his trial in Bruges. Investigators proved Hong was personally involved in recruiting victims from his native Vietnam and arranged for their transport to Europe and Britain for fees often in excess of £30,000.



Trafficking kingpin
Vo Van Hong
45, Vietnamese
JAILED

He employed a network of corrupt taxi drivers to move migrants from one country to another. Once they had reached Brussels, their identity documents were confiscated and they were held in prison-like safe houses run by Hong and his lieutenants before they could be contracted to criminal hauliers making the final crossing from the Continent to the UK.

Hong was so ruthless that he was caught on tapped phone calls describing his clients as “chickens“ and is said to have sent one of his own cousins to their death in the Essex lorry disaster.

Remarkably, investigators still do not know his true identity and his fingerprints match no records in Vietnam. Hong is thought to be one of two aliases — the other is Hoang Van Thong — that he has used since arriving illegally in Belgium four years ago.

At his trial in January, his lawyer claimed that he had fled Vietnam after his business failed and that he, too, was “a victim” of people smugglers.

The Irish connection

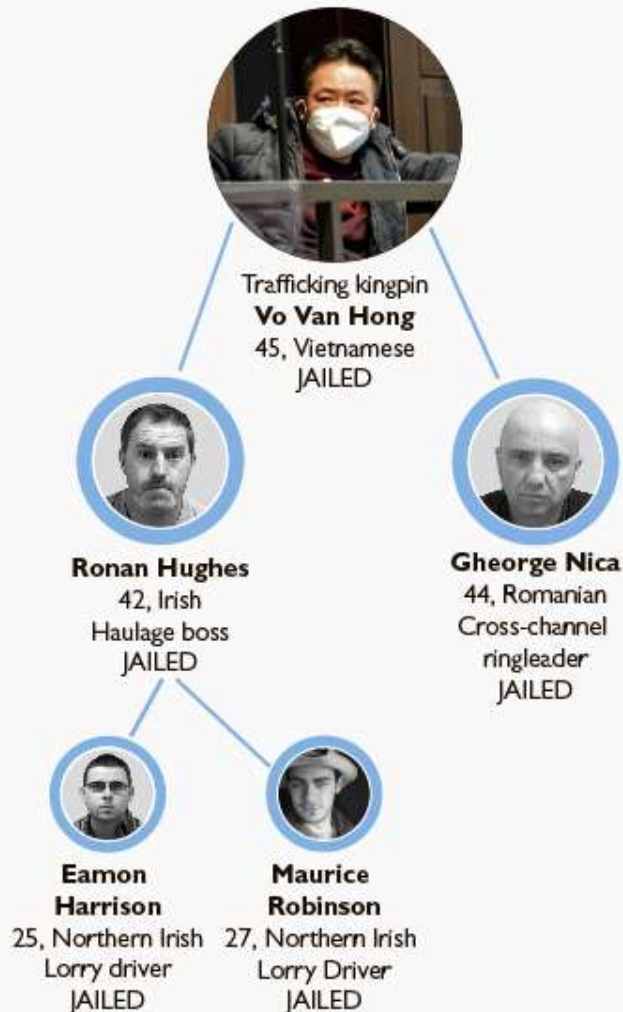
Shortly after 1am on October 23, 2019, lorry driver Maurice Robinson opened the doors of a sealed container he had just picked up from Purfleet docks on the Thames.

Inside the trailer were the lifeless bodies of 28 Vietnamese men, three teenage boys and eight women who had suffocated in temperatures of up to 38C after travelling on a ferry from the Belgian port of Zeebrugge. Some had desperately tried to tear their way out of the container, leaving bloody handprints on the panels inside.

Like thousands of Vietnamese migrants before them, the Essex victims had paid smugglers large sums of cash to start a new life in the UK.

Robinson, 27, from County Armagh, waited 23 minutes before calling 999, choosing instead to contact his paymasters first. He is one of nine people who have since been convicted in Britain for their part in a people smuggling racket.

Another Northern Irishman, Eamonn Harrison, 25, from County Down, was jailed last year for manslaughter after collecting the Essex victims from a rendezvous point near Dunkirk in France and driving the trailer to Zeebrugge.



The leaders of the cross-Channel trafficking operation, Irish haulage boss Ronan Hughes, 42, and Romanian-born Gheorghe Nica, 44, of Basildon, were jailed at the Old Bailey for 20 and 27 years respectively. The convictions attracted widespread publicity in the UK, but the real “Mr Big” who had sent so many migrants to an early grave remained in the shadows.

Traffickers tapped

About eight months before the deaths, police in Flanders, the Flemish-speaking region of Belgium, had started to suspect that a human-trafficking gang was operating on their turf.

In March 2019, they stopped a taxi driver travelling from Paris to Brussels with three Vietnamese passengers in the back. They later intercepted a vehicle with eight illegal Vietnamese migrants inside. A Vietnamese man who was accompanying them told police he was helping his compatriots get to Britain.

Analysis of the suspect's tablet computer and mobile revealed screenshots of Western Union transfers made from the UK, images of lorry registration plates, and a series of suspicious English, Belgian and Vietnamese phone numbers.

Several numbers seemed to come up repeatedly, prompting prosecutors to launch a wider investigation that involved tracking calls and monitoring bank accounts.

They were scratching the surface of Hong's gang, but they were not able to zero in properly on its linchpin until British police launched a murder investigation into the Essex deaths.

Data from mobile phones recovered from the Purfleet container and shared with the Belgian authorities allowed investigators to trace the movements of the victims through their proximity to phone masts — first in Bierne, a French town near Dunkirk where they had boarded Harrison's trailer.

Investigators then realised that many of the victims' phones had previously been active in the Anderlecht area of Brussels and that their Sim cards had been bought in that district. Numbers dialled by the Essex victims also began to point to Hong's gang, and a tapping operation was authorised.

Safe-house surveillance

Over the following weeks, two properties in particular became the focal point of the Belgian probe. The first was the second-floor flat above the Pizzeria Milano on the busy Ninoofsesteenweg thoroughfare.



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Ngo Sy Tai
20, Vietnamese
SUSPECT
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Alex Tran
18, Vietnamese
SUSPECT
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Nguyen Long
41, Vietnamese
JAILED



4th Lieutenant
31, Vietnamese
ON THE RUN

The other was an apartment about 10 minutes' walk away on Gespstraat, a quiet residential street near a square dedicated to Belgium's "Vétérans Coloniaux".

Surveillance uncovered frequent visits by a middle-aged Vietnamese man dressed in white trainers with red stripes and a black bag over his shoulder. The net was closing on Hong. Intercepts from some of the six phones he used began to unravel the full extent of his operation. "It was shocking," said Ann Lukowiak, the chief prosecutor in the case.

The two addresses under police scrutiny were rented safe houses where illegal Vietnamese migrants were held before Hong could arrange for their covert transfer to the UK. He allegedly worked with at least four lieutenants in Brussels, including one aged 18.

The gang was involved in recruiting potential clients from Vietnam and arranging their transport to western Europe. Only the final leg of the journey to the UK was contracted out. "There aren't that many Vietnamese lorry drivers," said a source familiar with the investigation. "That's where the Irish mob came into the picture."

VIP travel or horse box

Hong charged migrants up to €40,000 (now £34,000) each to get to Britain. About half of that sum would cover the journey to mainland Europe, while the rest was required for the final crossing from Belgium or France.

Transcripts of phone intercepts obtained by Myria, a Belgian anti-trafficking organisation, revealed that Hong was offering his clients a menu of "VIP" rates for the UK leg.

In one case, for €18,500 Hong promised to place a migrant in the cab of a lorry rather than in the trailer. For €19,000, he offered to transport them in a horse box or with other live animals — a move intended to lower the risk of detection at the port by police sniffer dogs.

He also agreed to knock off €1,000 when the father of another prospective client mentioned they shared a mutual friend — effectively a mate's rate.

The VIP prices, however, were merely a ploy to make more money. Virtually all the migrants still ended up in the back of a lorry container.



Dong Xuan Centre in Berlin is where many of the migrants were first brought by the gang

ALAMY

Payments would be made at various stages of the journey or worked off through bonded labour — usually in cannabis farms or nail bars — either en route or on arrival in the UK.

Belgian prosecutors discovered that some initial payments were made by migrants' families directly to Hong's relatives in Vietnam. At least one of the Essex victims, Tran Thi Ngoc, 19, made contact with Hong's gang through Facebook.

A 234-page judicial ruling issued after Hong's trial in Bruges says: "Victims are lured by criminal organisations with false claims of lucrative employment. Slavery, false promises and the confiscation of residence documents are used as tactics. Social media is increasingly playing a role in locating potential victims."

Little Hanoi

Although migrants reached Europe by various routes, investigators found that an option used by some of the Essex victims involved flying from Vietnam to Moscow. They would later cross into Belarus or Ukraine and then be driven from Poland or the Czech Republic to Germany.

Most of Hong's clients would end up at the Dong Xuan Centre in Berlin, a giant Asian-themed indoor market nicknamed "Little Hanoi". Employing about 2,000 people and serving as a hub for the city's Vietnamese community — as well as a tourist draw — the site allowed new arrivals to the West to blend in easily.

Some would stay in Germany to work illegally in the restaurant sector or selling counterfeit goods. But most had their sights set on the UK.

An intelligence briefing issued last month by Britain's National Crime Agency (NCA) says: "The UK is widely perceived as an attractive destination by Vietnamese nationals seeking economic opportunities overseas. It is almost certain that the perceived ease of working illegally is the single most significant pull factor for Vietnamese migrants using irregular routes into the UK."

Hong used a network of Brussels-based taxi drivers, mainly of North African heritage, to pick up migrants from Berlin and to transfer them to collection points for lorries heading to southeast England.

Before they embarked on the final leg, up to a dozen migrants at a time — including at least 15 of the 39 Essex victims — would be held under guard in the Anderlecht safe houses.



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They were made to sleep on the floor, fed a meagre diet of watery noodles and discouraged from leaving the premises after handing over their identity papers to Hong's henchmen.

One migrant, prosecutors discovered, had been held in one of the flats for six months because he had run out of funds to complete his journey to the UK.

Picked up by police

A Moroccan man who lives next door to the Gespstraat apartment recalled: "I used to see Vietnamese people coming and going all the time. I saw the police here only once. What happened was an absolute tragedy. These people are crazy to lock up those migrants in a refrigerated lorry."

Nourdine Chahboun, the owner of Pizzeria Milano, had also raised concerns in the past about the number of Vietnamese people arriving and departing in taxis from Hong's flat. The enormous water bill at the properties should also have attracted suspicion.

On October 11, 2019 — less than a fortnight before the Essex tragedy — two of the youngest victims, Tran Ngoc Hieu, 17, and Dinh Dinh Thai Quyen, 18, arrived by taxi at the Gespstraat safe house.

The teenagers had previously been intercepted as they tried to reach Britain in the back of a lorry from the Netherlands, and had decided to try once more after fleeing an asylum centre for minors near Maastricht.

One of Hong's lieutenants had been sent to collect them from across the Belgian border and bring them to Anderlecht. Their taxi, however, was followed by Dutch police who told the Belgian authorities. A report was filed via Europol, but it seems local law enforcement agencies in Brussels decided there was insufficient evidence to act.

Trafficked by taxi

On the morning of October 22, 2019, three taxis hired by Hong's gang left Brussels for Bierne to meet Harrison and his trailer. It has now emerged that one of the taxis arrived late, meaning that two Vietnamese women and an Albanian man escaped with their lives after missing the pick-up.

Others who would climb into Harrison's lorry had come from separate safe houses in Paris controlled by another gang. Less than 12 hours later, they were all dead. On hearing the news, Hong and his deputies fled to Germany to lie low. It was probably greed that lured him and at least one of his lieutenants, Nguyen Long, 41, back to Brussels to continue their lucrative business.



The lorry in which the 39 migrants died is examined by police

STEFAN ROUSSEAU/PA

When police arrested Hong on May 26, 2020, they discovered the passports of three Vietnamese teenagers who had been caught in the back of a lorry at Coquelles, near Calais, in December 2018. The driver on that occasion was Eamonn Harrison. The evidence showed for the first time a direct link between Hong and the Irish-Romanian ring.

Belgian prosecutors accused Hong of arranging at least 37 smuggling runs to the UK between the summer of 2018 and his arrest almost two years later. Once he was in custody awaiting trial, Nguyen Long continued the trafficking for several months. Long was jailed for 10 years in January.

Birmingham arrest

Detectives at the NCA have been working to round up the rest of Hong's gang after alleged members sought refuge in the UK. One suspected lieutenant, known as Ngo Sy Tai, 20, was picked up at a house in Redditch, Worcestershire, in December 2020 after Belgium issued a warrant for his arrest.

Tai was tracked down after he posted an image of himself on Facebook standing outside the Bullring shopping centre in nearby Birmingham.

An even more elaborate surveillance operation was deployed by the NCA to arrest Alex Tran, 18, another of Hong's alleged lieutenants. Tran was caught at a Sainsbury's petrol station just off the A66 in Middlesbrough in June last year.

Both men — who are thought to be operating under false identities — have claimed to be minors who are victims of trafficking. Tai, however, was made to undergo a bone scan to prove his real age.

The suspects have been extradited to Belgium and are expected to go on trial in May. Another gang member — possibly Hong's fourth lieutenant — is still understood to be at large in Britain.

Martin Grace, head of organised immigration crime at the NCA, said: "We are continuing to investigate UK-based organised crime group members who we suspect of being directly linked to the October 2019 Essex incident, and who remained active in facilitating the illegal entry of migrants afterwards."

Police believe most Vietnamese migrants remain undeterred by the tragedy. "Vietnamese organised crime groups continue to be engaged in smuggling people to the UK through Europe using methods which pose a grave risk to those they attempt to facilitate," Grace said.

Despite the current focus on migrants arriving by boat, last month the NCA arrested a 32-year-old man from Birmingham who is suspected of being a "high-ranking" member of a new Vietnamese smuggling ring using cross-Channel lorries during the pandemic.

Hong's notorious operation may have ended, but there appears to be no shortage of others willing to take over his mantle. "These are multinational criminals," said Stef Janssens, an expert in human trafficking at Myria in Belgium. "For them, it's always about profit."