

U.S. opens criminal probe after 51 people die in Texas truck



Residents pay a visit to mourn the victims at the scene where dozens of refugees and migrants were found dead inside a trailer truck in San Antonio, Texas, US, on June 28, 2022 [Go Nakamura/ Reuters]

San Antonio, June 29 (RHC)-- Authorities in the United States have opened a criminal investigation into the deaths of at least 51 people who had been trapped inside a sweltering tractor-trailer found abandoned in the city of San Antonio in southern Texas.

The incident was one of the deadliest human trafficking tragedies along the U.S.-Mexico border in recent history. The driver of the truck and two other people tied to the smuggling incident were taken into custody on Tuesday, U.S. Representative Henry Cuellar of Texas told the Associated Press news agency.

The driver, a U.S. citizen, is currently in a local hospital, according to Mexican officials. The other men, identified as Juan Francisco D'Luna-Bilbao and Juan Claudio D'Luna-Mendez, both Mexican citizens, were arrested from the building where the truck was registered to. The men were charged with possessing firearms while residing in the U.S. illegally, according to court documents. The complaints did not make any specific allegations related to the deaths.

The deceased included 39 men and 12 women and were discovered on Monday on the outskirts of San Antonio, where temperatures soared to a high of 39.4C (103F). Bodies were found inside the vehicle and strewn over a couple of blocks after the trailer's rear door had been opened, a local law enforcement official told Reuters.

Local authorities said there were no signs of water or visible means of air-conditioning inside the truck. The officials said there were "stacks of bodies" and that some of the refugees and migrants were hot to the touch.

"It's unspeakable," San Antonio Mayor Ron Nirenberg said on MSNBC, noting that his community depends on migrants while there is a labor shortage. "It's a tragedy beyond explanation."

More than a dozen survivors, including four minors, were transported to area hospitals for heat stroke and exhaustion. At least 27 Mexicans, three Guatemalans and four Hondurans were believed to be among the dead, according to officials from all three countries. There was no immediate information on the nationality of the other victims.

The truck may have been carrying about 100 refugees and migrants, but the exact number remained unclear, officials told Reuters. It appeared they had recently crossed the border and were picked up by the truck to be taken to where they would work, Reuters reported, citing a Mexican official, a Customs and Border Protection (CBP) official and another US official, all of whom requested anonymity to discuss the matter.

Authorities were alerted to the truck through an emergency 911 call from a passer-by flagged down for help by a migrant who had escaped from the truck, the officials said. The victims were found sprinkled with a pungent substance, officials said, a practice some smugglers are known to use to mask the scent of human cargo and evade canine detection.

San Antonio's police chief, William McManus, on Monday said a person who works in a nearby building heard a cry for help, came out to investigate, found the trailer doors partially opened and saw a number of bodies inside.

The surviving refugees and migrants will likely be released into the U.S. to pursue asylum or other forms of humanitarian relief, the CBP official and two other law enforcement officials told Reuters. Some survivors of human smuggling in the past have been taken into the custody of the U.S. Marshals Service to testify as witnesses.

The deaths highlighted the challenge of controlling migrant crossings for Biden, a Democrat who came into office pledging to reverse some of the hardline immigration policies of his Republican predecessor, Donald Trump. Republicans have criticised Biden's border strategy ahead of the midterm congressional elections in November.

The I-35 highway, near where the truck was found, runs through San Antonio from the Mexican border and is a popular smuggling corridor because of the large volume of truck traffic, according to Jack Staton, a former senior official with a US Immigration and Customs Enforcement investigative unit who retired in December.

In July 2017, 10 migrants died after being transported in a tractor-trailer discovered by San Antonio police in a Walmart parking lot. The driver, James Matthew Bradley Jr, was later sentenced to life in prison for his role in that smuggling operation. Staton said: "It was only a matter of time before a tragedy like this was going to happen again."

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