

French court jails 18 members of English Channel people-smuggling network

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Two inflatable dinghies carrying migrants and refugees make their way towards Britain in the English Channel [File: Chris J Ratcliffe/Reuters] The longest sentence of 15 years is given to Iraqi national Mirkhan Rasoul, who was accused of leading the network.

Paris, November 6 (RHC)-- A French court has found 18 people guilty in a major people-smuggling trial that has shed light on the often deadly business of transporting migrants and refugees on small boats across the English Channel from France to the United Kingdom.

The defendants were swept up in a pan-European police operation in 2022 that led to dozens of arrests.

The longest sentence of 15 years in prison was handed down on Tuesday to Iraqi national Mirkhan Rasoul, 26, who was accused of being the leader of the network and coordinating its actions from his French prison cell after previous convictions.

The sentences issued by the court in the northern city of Lille for the other 17 accused, who included one woman, ranged from two to 10 years in prison. "These sentences are obviously very severe," Kamel Abbas, a lawyer who represented one of the defendants already imprisoned in France, was quoted as saying by The Associated Press news agency. "That's a testimony of the scale of the case and of the intention to severely punish the smugglers."

Most of the defendants were not in court for the verdicts and sentencing. Some attended the trial remotely from various prisons in northern France while others are not in custody.

Arrest warrants have been issued for nine of the other defendants who were convicted in absentia. Fourteen of the 18 defendants are from Iraq, and the others come from Iran, Poland, France and the Netherlands.

"The defendants are not volunteers helping their fellow humans but merchants of death," the prosecutor said during the trial, describing how boats were loaded with passengers "up to 15 times their theoretical capacity."

An investigation found that this particular network from 2020 to 2022 had great control over crossings from France to the UK, which have cost dozens of lives in recent years.

More than 50 searches led to the seizure of 1,200 life jackets, nearly 150 inflatable boats and 50 boat engines during operations carried out jointly by France, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and Britain and coordinated by the Europol and Eurojust agencies.

Britain's National Crime Agency (NCA) said in a statement that one of the men convicted had been arrested by British authorities and extradited to France for the trial.

Kaiwan Poore, 40, was detained by British officers at Manchester Airport as he tried to board a flight to Turkey in July 2022. He was given a five-year sentence by the Lille court.

The NCA said each single crossing of migrants and refugees from France to England stood to net the criminal network about 100,000 euros (\$109,000) in profit. The trial was held during what has been a particularly deadly year for attempted crossings of the English Channel, one of the world's busiest shipping lanes.

More than 31,000 people have made the perilous crossing so far this year, more than in all of 2023, though fewer than in 2022.

At least 56 people have died in the attempts this year, according to French officials, making 2024 the deadliest year since the crossings began surging in 2018.

British and French authorities are seeking to improve cooperation to stop the people-smuggling networks after several years during which post-Brexit tensions appeared to hamper attempts to tackle the problem.

The NCA said a number of those convicted in the trial had been identified thanks to the Joint Intelligence Cell, a specialist British-French unit based in northern France set up to target people smugglers.

“Their sole motive was profit, and they didn’t care about the fate of migrants they were putting to sea in wholly inappropriate and dangerous boats,” NCA Deputy Director Craig Turner said. He said the network was “among the most prolific we have come across” in terms of the number of crossings.

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer has promised to “smash the gangs” behind the trade and said people smuggling should be put on a par with global “terrorism”.

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