

## JOINT ACTION TO TACKLE WEST AFRICAN HUMAN TRAFFICKING NETWORKS

### The Hague, the Netherlands

An innovative pan-European operation to combat the trafficking of human beings from West Africa was carried out by law enforcement authorities in nine European countries yesterday evening and early this morning. The operation was aimed at targeting Nigerian criminal networks operating across Europe.

As part of the operation, led by Germany's Bundeskriminalamt (BKA) and coordinated by Europol and Europol's Liaison Officers from the participating Member States and third countries, acting together from Europol's Operations Room in The Hague, the Netherlands, places of prostitution were checked in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland. In addition, two countries - Italy and Spain - had representatives present in the Operations Room ready to support with checks related to their countries. The activity of the United Kingdom was focussed upon transit routes, principally into the UK and outbound to other European destinations, and supporting our European partners with live time intelligence support. The objective was to identify people trafficked from West Africa, and obtain information on the human traffickers involved. The results submitted by the countries involved are being analysed by Europol to help identify key figures in human trafficking in Europe and establish possible criminal organisational structures.

In Germany, the Bundeskriminalamt and more than 90 police services in 12 federal states carried out checks on brothels and similar properties. The German Federal Police carried out supporting checks at German airports. According to provisional figures, more than 468 West Africans, mainly women, were controlled and identified in the countries involved. The investigations are still ongoing.

For years, European police forces have been closely monitoring the trafficking of women from West Africa for sexual exploitation. Investigations show the existence of an international network of West African pimps, smuggled women turned into prostitutes, facilitators and people who launder money, rent out passports or forge documents. After being recruited in their home countries, the victims are smuggled to Europe and sent to brothels with forged identity documents. Perpetrators use voodoo, which is also practised in West Africa, as a means of exerting pressure on their victims, to intimidate them or break their resistance. A situation report on human trafficking from last year shows that police checks continue to play an important role in the identification of victims and the associated shedding of light on previously undetected crime.

BKA President Jörg Ziercke commented: "These first European control measures are another important step towards establishing the complex crime structures that are difficult to unravel in the field of trafficking human beings from West Africa. The checks show that a transnational compilation of information and coordinated measures to suppress human trafficking are vital for the detection of structures and the successful fight against them. Only in this way can the victims' situation be improved in the long term".

Europol's Director, Rob Wainwright, said of the operation: "Collaboration between Europol and our international law enforcement partners is essential, if we are to bring to justice the major criminals that are trafficking and taking advantage of vulnerable women from West Africa. Europol will continue to proactively support such cases with our highly skilled analysts and unique technical capabilities."

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