

CRIMINAL GANG RECRUITING PORTUGUESE WOMEN INTO SHAM MARRIAGES DISMANTLED

15 Jan 2019

[Press Release](#)



An organised criminal group recruiting dozens of women into sham marriages was detected and dismantled by Belgian and Portuguese authorities, with the active support of Europol and Eurojust. Altogether 17 suspects were arrested today in Belgium and 3 in Portugal in an internationally coordinated action day.

The criminal group was involved in the facilitation of illegal immigration by organising sham marriages, predominately between Portuguese and Pakistani nationals. Portuguese women were recruited to marry Pakistani men they had never met and in return, received several thousands of euros. The couples then travelled to Belgium, where the wives were soon employed by (believed to be bogus) Belgian companies. By purchasing shares in the companies, this allowed the husbands to stay in the EU, obtain resident permits and then profit unjustly from social and other benefits. The shares were later transferred between the wives, allowing new recruits to become partners of the companies. The women usually travelled back to Portugal and would occasionally return to Belgium for police and immigration checks.

The investigation started in Belgium by the Belgian Federal Police in 2015 after authorities discovered a suspicious increase in the number of mixed marriage certificates in Ieper (Belgium). Due to the international nature of the crime, a Joint Investigation Team (JIT) was set up which culminated in a Joint Action Day today, 15 January 2019. Today's operation was conducted

simultaneously in Leper and Brussels and in Lisbon and Algarve (Portugal). To facilitate direct cooperation, Belgian officers were present in Portugal while their Portuguese counterparts from the Immigration and Borders Service (SEF) travelled to Belgium. In Belgium, 18 house searches were carried out and 43 irregular migrants were discovered, mostly of Pakistani origin. Counterfeit documents and mobile devices were seized for further investigation. In Portugal, law enforcement arrested three suspects, searched nine houses and seized various pieces of technological equipment (laptops, desktops and other mobile devices).

Europol supported the joint operation on-the-spot. Analysts were deployed to Belgium and Portugal for real-time information cross-checks and mobile phone forensics. This coordinated international cooperation proved very useful in the dismantling of this criminal network.

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