

‘Italy has caused a MELTDOWN’ 700,000 migrants waiting to cross into Europe from Libya

A BOTTLENECK of 700,000 migrants is waiting in Libya to cross the Mediterranean to Europe, the National Crime Agency has said. The number – greater than the population of Leicester – highlights the difficulties facing the EU in controlling migrants seeking a new life in Europe.



WAITING: African migrants sit in a packed room covered by blankets near Tripoli

Senior members of the NCA, dubbed Britain’s FBI, revealed the figures as they detailed the increasingly tough battle they face to stop people smugglers.

NCA directors warned of a sharp rise in attempted illegal sea crossings from Africa to Europe this year, with 300 people drowning last week.

Migrants are then crossing Europe and using increasingly devious ways to evade detection, including hiding in “coffin-sized” secret compartments in vehicles.

Migration across the Mediterranean from Africa is a critical issue for the EU, with member states arguing over the best way to deal with it.

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Last month saw Italy turn away boats carrying migrants rescued from the sea while Angela Merkel's leadership of Germany has come under threat as she faces pressure to reach a deal to cope with the issue.

Agreement was tentatively reached at an EU summit last month, but member states are still arguing over solutions.

Tom Dowdall, NCA deputy director of organised immigration crime, said the problem was growing. Attempted crossings to Greece and Turkey are up by 47 per cent on last year, with those to Spain and Italy up by 75 per cent.

They have not reached the peak levels of 2015, caused after Mrs Merkel made a controversial decision to open Germany's borders and allow a million refugees in.

Mr Dowdall said: "The activity by the Italian Republic has caused a meltdown in Libya, creating a bottleneck. There are about 700,000 migrants in Libya and this is making it more difficult for them to move out."

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Chris Hogben, NCA head of operations for organised immigration crime, said rescue boats manned by non-governmental organisations were inadvertently aiding people smugglers.

The NGOs are supposed to rescue people once they are more than 12 miles from the Libyan coast, but come in much closer, he said.

He said: "They make it easier for the crime groups who now send a boat with not enough fuel on purpose as they know they will be picked up."

The details emerged at a briefing on Project Invigor, a joint NCA, Home Office, Coastguard, Border Force and Crown Prosecution Service operation, costing £14million a year to run.

Around 140 officers make up the squad which has 250 live investigations into organised gangs trying to sneak people into the UK and those forging documents to aid them and keep illegal immigrants here.

The main sources for migrants into Europe are Libya, Ethiopia, Sudan, Niger and Afghanistan. Mr Dowdall said that smugglers collectively make up to £6billion a year charging would-be migrants.

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A single boat from Africa to Europe can net them up to £300,000. He said after the destruction of the Jungle camp in Calais in 2016, which had up to 10,000 migrants, the issue has now shifted to Belgium.

He said: "Organised crime gangs are loading people into lorries, before bringing them through France and onto the UK. There are adapted hides in the rear of vehicles, an area for six to eight people, with welded false doors, and coffin 'hides'."

Mr Dowdall said "complicit lorry drivers" were charging up to £2,000 per migrant. Iraqi Kurd, Afghan and Albanian gangs were the most prolific people smugglers to the UK.

On Thursday, illegal immigrant Albanian Afrim Xhekaliu, 41, of Barnet, north London, was jailed for six years at Lewes Crown Court for trying to smuggle eight people into the UK in a boat.

He was caught in January when it ran out of fuel off the coast of Eastbourne and they had to be rescued. Last month, as part of an NCA probe into a gang thought to be behind many attempts to get corrupt truck drivers to smuggle people from Belgium to the UK, investigators held three Albanian nationals in London.

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