

OFFICIAL

UNDERWORLD: BEHIND THE SCENES OF THE NCA

Ep 6 - SUNSHINE AND LOLLIPOPS

NARRATOR [00:00:00] I'm Ellie Flynn, and this is Underworld. Behind the scenes at the NCA, this podcast series unearths the murky world of dangerous criminals across the UK and the incredible work undertaken by the National Crime Agency to bring them to justice.

JAMES HOPES [00:00:22] We spoke to the two female passengers in question. The passengers said they were carrying five checked-in suitcases. When they searched suitcases, each of the five were found to contain large quantities of cash in various denominations.

MANISHA PRAJAPATI [00:00:31] We also did forensics on the cash found in the suitcases and identified it was linked to a male who was involved in attempted murder, arms trafficking and drug trafficking. So we know that the source of the cash is from other OCGs.

SIO IAN TRUBY [00:00:46] They we're getting about four hundred to five hundred thousand pounds in a suitcase. The biggest amount that was moved was two and a half million.

JAMES HOPES [00:00:52] Fair to say that passengers don't routinely carry that amount of cash. Certainly our biggest seizure in border force of that year. So, yeah, quite an outstanding seizure that day.

SAL MELKI [00:01:00] It's estimated in the hundreds of billions of pounds that money is laundered with a UK footprint cash exchanged at a street level drugs deal. So the idea is to get that money out of the UK. So then that can be used by the criminals to fund their lifestyles.

NARRATOR [00:01:14] This is the story of an NCA investigation into a vast international money laundering operation. A network of criminal couriers that smuggle more than 104 million pounds from the UK to Dubai, during 83 separate trips between November 2019 and October 2020. A crime group overseen by ringleader Abdullah Alfasasi, who was jailed for more than nine years in July last year.

OFFICIAL

OFFICIAL

Episode five, Sunshine and Lollipops.

Our story begins in 2020 at Heathrow Airport. The case, which was known as Operation Brightly, was led by senior investigating officer Ian Truby.

SIO IAN TRUBY [00:02:06] So on the 3rd of October, Border Force were conducting checks on outbound passengers travelling to Dubai. They looked into some checked in suitcases and they found a quantity of cash. At which point they contacted the NCA. The first thing is that the people who were carrying the cash, in this case, two, two females, Tara Hanlon and Megan Reeves, were arrested. So, Border Force made the arrest. We then determined that given the quantity of the cash, that there would be forensic opportunity. So, we called out one of our crime scene investigators, CSI, to recover what they could in terms of DNA, fingerprints, packaging, etc.

NARRATOR [00:02:41] A search of Tara Hanlon's home after her arrest revealed that she'd done this at least three times previously and had a cash declaration made to Dubai Customs for around £1.1 million. She'd exported successfully £3.5 million and was now attempting to remove a further £1.9 million.

SIO IAN TRUBY [00:03:02] We then obviously look at the bigger picture, as I say, and we looked into the travel bookings, the travel history, and identified that 23 other people had travelled on bookings made using that same phone number and same email address and same credit card or a combination thereof. So then we look at the bigger picture. Right, were these people involved in the carriage of cash? On Tara's phone when we got into it, we identified that she'd been in communication with a lady called Michelle Clarke, and Michelle Clarke appeared to be giving the directions, telling her what to do, and it was Michelle that Tara had reached out to immediately when she was stopped by Border Force officers. I'm scared. I don't know what to do, etcetera. Michelle deleted all of the messages that she sent back. So, we knew that Michelle Clarke was involved. We also knew from the phone that there were some other people that had been talking to Tara about the movement of money to Dubai and we then started to look at the financial aspects of Michelle Clarke and identified that there were at least nine other people who had been on similar flights to Tara, and had also received money from Michelle Clarke, which we believe was the expenses money for travelling to Dubai. So the train fares and the other

OFFICIAL

OFFICIAL

miscellaneous expenses that the people get. We also knew that Tara had been paid £3,000 for each trip. Again, that was a communication, one of her WhatsApp communications.

NARRATOR [00:04:23] As the investigations soon discovered, the smugglers had been filling suitcases with cash for some time. Manisha Prajapati was the lead financial investigator for the NCA on Operation Brightly. It was her job to follow the money.

MANISHA PRAJAPATI [00:04:35] We had a link to a case that started in January of 2020 where a misplaced bag had been brought to our attention by Border Force, and it was my colleague who dealt with the case. The bag contained approximately half a million pounds. Again, it was intended to go to Dubai. What had happened is the person who was travelling with that suitcase, he returned to the UK about ten days after the bag had been discovered and we arrested him at that point. His phone was seized at that time. So, somebody made the decision. Let's run the phone numbers on his phone through the list of phone numbers we had on the Tara Hanlon and Kamaryt case. And lo and behold, Abdullah Alfalasi was a connection. So we know that this had been going on for a lot longer than from July 2020 onwards.

SIO IAN TRUBY [00:05:40] They we're getting about four hundred to five hundred thousand pounds in a suitcase. The biggest amount that was moved was two and a half million.

NARRATOR [00:05:46] But what happens at Border Force when they find a suitcase?

SIO IAN TRUBY [00:05:50] It's just literally; are all these bags your bags? Yes, they are. Did you pack them yourself? Yes, I did. Do you know what's in them? Yes, I do. Is there any cash? No, there isn't. Do you know the code? No, I don't. Okay. Cash case is forced open, and there itM is. So they were putting coffee in the suitcase probably because they thought you put the dogs off... It doesn't. And then some mouthwash and other bits and pieces just to try and, you know, confuse the dogs, but it wouldn't. The cash dogs are very, very effective.

JAMES HOPES [00:06:16] My names James Hopes and I'm a Border Force senior officer working at Heathrow Airport. They were initially very calm during the basic questioning.

OFFICIAL

OFFICIAL

So, so they sort of asked questions as to where they were, where to go and to what they're carrying and they're generally quite, quite relaxed during that part. They just started becoming nervous and start sort of wringing their hands when the officer said that they're checked-in bags will be brought up from the aircraft and searched in front of them, and then as soon as the bags were opened and the cash was identified, interestingly, they didn't seem that surprised when we found the cash inside. But like I said, they quickly said the bags belonged to a friend who lived in Dubai and they were just taking the bags out to give to that friend in Dubai. One of the passengers admitted to knowing there was cash in a suitcase but denied knowing exactly how much was in there. They also said that the friend in Dubai had agreed to pay for the holiday and the flights in exchange for these two passengers taking the mystery suitcases out to them. After that, we referred both passengers to the NCA, now both arrested on suspicion of money laundering, and are pending further investigation.

DAVID BOWERS [00:07:12] My name is David Bowers, NCA senior officer, I went to Heathrow in March 2021. Op. Brightly had started going and it was in the early stages. People had been arrested at the very start of 2020, the first people that were arrested didn't really know at the time that they were tied into Brightly. From the CCTV they identified two of the very first players who were involved.

MANISHA PRAJAPATI [00:07:40] It starts small, so you look at the similarities between the two people that were arrested a month apart. We identified how their tickets had been purchased and that led us to two people, two individuals, one called Michelle Clark, and then another person believed to be based out in the Emirates whose email had been used to purchase the tickets to Dubai for both people and his name was Abdullah Alfalasi.

DAVID BOWERS [00:08: 11] Later on that year, Border Force intercepted two people who were travelling through Heathrow to Dubai with cash. They were the the first people, out the sort of Lollipops gang that were arrested. They were tied to, a woman from Yorkshire, who was living in Dubai at the time, Michelle Clark, and it was identified that she was arranging the flights for a whole series of couriers, and it was eleven couriers that she'd arranged the flights from. So it was a question of identifying them, through the payments that she'd made through her Monzo account, so she'd been paying people to travel, giving them about £3,000 and arranging stays in luxury hotels in Dubai in exchange for them taking the cash out of Heathrow to Dubai.

OFFICIAL

OFFICIAL

NARRATOR [00:09:04] It became clear early on that huge amounts of cash were on the move out of the UK airports headed for the Middle East. The size of the UK's economy means that money laundering is big business for OCGs or organised crime groups. Tackling illicit finances is a key priority for the NCA under the umbrella of the National Economic Crime Centre.

SAL MELKI [00:09:26] My name's Sal Melki. I'm the head of money laundering threat response in the National Crime Agency, and that role is both leading the national crime agencies response against money laundering and also bringing together different law enforcement organisations, but also across government and with the private sector, so, like banks.

NARRATOR [00:09:42] The NCA is economic crime teams work across all economic threats, including fraud, bribery and corruption.

SAL MELKI [00:09:50] Money laundering is, I guess you could say, a sort of lifeblood across all crime types and so most crime types are committed for financial gain and the most serious and organised criminals generate huge amounts of illicit finances. So, it's all the way from how technology is exploited to launder money. So, things like the use of cryptocurrencies to launder the proceeds of crime, all the way through to things like cash-based money laundering. So, you know, the sort of more traditional stuffing, suitcases full of cash, trying to get them across borders and into different jurisdictions, and also things such as complex use of the financial system, both the regulated and unregulated sectors. So this is all about turning criminal money, sometimes criminal cash, sometimes electronic money into an untraceable, legitimate source of money and that's how criminals get to enjoy the spoils of their crime and try and they do their best to try and hide how they do that from law enforcement.

NARRATOR [00:10:49] It didn't take long for the Operation Brightly team to identify their key suspect, the man whose name came up on those couriers' phones, Abdullah Alfalasi - a UAE national and resident who had control of the credit card and phone numbers that were used to book the couriers' flights. He often travelled to the UK but wasn't in the country at the time of Tara Hanlon's arrest. Here's Ian Truby again.

OFFICIAL

OFFICIAL

SIO IAN TRUBY [00:11:15] You're never sure what you're going to get from overseas when you make an enquiry. Didn't know if we'd get any information from the United Emirates authorities, but we did have enough evidence to say there were nine people here that we need to speak to and we need to effect their arrest because we need to search their premises and their phones to look for evidence of what they'd been involved in.

MANISHA PRAJAPATI [00:11:34] Most of them were linked to Abdullah Alfalasi in one way or another. Most of them had their tickets with either his telephone number or email address attached to them. That information was then shared with the Emirati authorities through intelligence police to police inquiries, as well as formal inquiries. All of that showed that all these couriers had been declaring cash on arrival in Dubai under the guise of a company called Omninvest Gold Trading LLC, for which Abdullah Alfalasi was the director.

SIO IAN TRUBY [00:12:12] The UAE authorities were sent a request to gather some information for us, and could they get some form of explanation for Michele Clark and Mr. Alfalasi. So, we made our arrests in May 2021. Most people answered no comment, which they're fully entitled to do but we did get some information off the mobile phones of those people, so we found copies of letters. So, the company that was being used to cover the movements was called Omninvest Ltd. And we also established what the modus operandi was of the of the group. So, the courier would come to central London, be met by a taxi, be taken to a second address where suitcases would be put in the back of the taxi. Those suitcases all had numbers locks on them. So the three digit code locks that everyone's probably familiar with. They'd be taken to the airport, check themselves in, and then, they would send photographs of the baggage tags, to prove that the bags have been checked in to Michele Clarke. Once they arrived in Dubai, they were sent an image of the letter from this company Omninvest, which said they were there carrying cash on behalf of Omninvest Ltd. They'd also be given the codes to the suitcases so they could open them up for Dubai customs and they'd sign a declaration form. The cash went one way. They went to their five-star luxury hotel for a couple of nights and repeated it a few days later. So that's how the organisation was working.

DAVID BOWERS [00:13:35] It looked like from looking at the phones that has been going on for several years and it started off and he was probably moving cash himself and he recruited a small group of people, but perhaps because of the lack of traveling and due to COVID, etc., there was a bit of build up of illegal money in the UK, dirty cash. So when

OFFICIAL

OFFICIAL

travel was recommenced again, there was this huge pressure to try and get money out and he seized on the opportunity to make money by selling commission on that and the amount of cash that needed taking out was huge and they had to be flying so frequently to take that amount of cash out of the UK.

NARRATOR [00:14:12] For the couriers, it was easy money with accommodation and a short holiday as part of the package. Here's Tara Hannon giving a short video tour of the room in her five-star hotel.

TARA HANNON VIDEO FOOTAGE [00:14:30] Then we've got the room, nice little sofa, a massive bed, nice amenities...

SIO IAN TRUBY [00:14:423] In December 2021, for reasons I'll never be able to fathom, Mr. Alfalasi decided he would come to London again and he got arrested. His phones were seized and we found a wealth of information about his money laundering activities, not just in the UK. All over Europe. He was removing cash from the Netherlands, Spain, Germany, Italy, as well as the UK, millions of pounds at a time. The phone also contained his deal sheets to show how much he was making, what percentage he was charged in the criminal organisations for the movement of the cash. And we're also pretty able to get a fairly good picture of how much money was involved. And eventually we did get some information from the UAE authorities around the cash declarations that our people we thought were involved in it had actually made when they got to Dubai. So we had 85 movements of cash totaling just about 110 million. That's a lot of money.

Commented [LB1]: Trailer material

DAVID BOWERS [00:15:47] He decided to travel to London at Christmas with his family to see the lights, which was a great boom for us and as soon as we discovered he was in the UK and flowed into Heathrow and I was involved in arranging his arrest, in his luxury flat behind Harvey Nicks in London. We knocked on the door. There was a huge pause. It wasn't answered at first, but eventually after repeated knocking, he answered the door was immediately arrested and he was absolutely shocked and then dumbfounded. We seized his phones, which was the absolute, you know, really vital evidence, because he'd recorded lots of the flights and the arrangements on his phones, he'd booked tickets. He tried to hide one of the phones claiming it was wife's, his wife came in. I was asking her about that phone and she didn't know he was trying to hide it. She, she immediately said, No, it's not my phone, it's his, and a lot of the operation was set out on this mobile phone.

OFFICIAL

OFFICIAL

SIO IAN TRUBY [00:17:01] So he had three phones and two had UAE numbers attached to them and one had a UK number attached to them. But he was primarily using WhatsApp to communicate and a couple of other messaging applications which had deleted themselves off the phone. So we didn't have all of his communication, but it would appear when things like Telegram weren't working properly, he'd resort to WhatsApp, which did us which did us a big favour. So, that's really what condemned him and indeed all of the others.

NARRATOR [00:17:29] And what kind of encryption services was he trying to use when he wasn't using WhatsApp?

SIO IAN TRUBY [00:17:32] So Telegram was was one, an application called TwoTock, which I hadn't come across before this job, but that was the way it was being done and he was sending people he was working with, he was sending explicit instructions, delete this, delete it. When we're finished, by the way, don't forget to delete this now and he didn't always.

NARRATOR [00:17:50] The couriers and Alfalasi kept in touch on a WhatsApp group arranging shipments and travel. It was named Sunshine and L ollipops. Extracting evidence from Alfalasi's mobile phone was critical to the investigation. And it required detailed forensic work.

SIO IAN TRUBY [00:18:06] When we seize the phone, it goes for analysis and effectively what the forensic service providers are able to do is provide you with a mirror image of what's on that phone and then they provide you with a forensic tool which you can use to interrogate the content of that phone. Now with the best will in the world, you cannot look at every single piece of data on the average phone, there's just far, far too much. So, you do it by applying word search terms. I think he had over 40,000 images on his phone. Now, they were valuable because once you got your eye in you'd spot there's a cash declaration, there's image of a passport, there's the baggage tags being sent to him, etc. So, you can go through the images, then trace them back to the communication that they were shared under. And then you can word search either names, addresses or phone numbers and just to pull out the rest of that data and as I said, there was masses of it. It

OFFICIAL

OFFICIAL

was a great shock and surprise at how much was actually on there and it took an awful lot of work to go through it all.

NARRATOR [00:19:] By now, Ian and the team knew a lot more about the man they believed was the kingpin behind the cash movements, but who was Abdullah Alfalasi?

SIO IAN TRUBY [00:19:14] He's a UAE national. He's actually married into a very wealthy family in the UAE. He had a number of different business interests. He was involved in a number of different companies. Historically, under UAE law, any company that was set up in the UAE had to have a UAE national as a sort of the head as a director. He received a small fee for, for being involved in that type of activity. It's not clear to me how he got involved so heavily in the money laundering, but he certainly has been involved in that since 2017. He was a cash courier himself for a couple of years before recruiting others to do it for him. And he had had control of a network of people who'd come to him saying, I've got the cash, what rate can you give me? So it was 10% for Sterling, 13% for Scottish or improperly packed English notes and about 6.5% for Euros. That's the way he would work. Yeah. What have you got? It's got to be above a certain amount. I'll take 10% here and I'll take a small fee for what happens when he gets it to the UAE as well. So that's what his role was. But how he got into that position is still not really known or understood.

NARRATOR [00:20:23] In the world of economic crime, an operation such as this is referred to as an International Controller Network.

SAL MELKI [00:20:30] The architecture that exists for an International Controller Network, like Alfalasi, can involve various different institutions, both under the influence and control of the International Controller Network. So those could be things like what we call money service bureaus. So the types of things that you'll see on the high street, like a bureau de change and things like that all the way through to more sophisticated networks of crypto brokers. So being able to exchange real world cash for crypto and then get that crypto converted back to real world cash. The other area that International Control Networks exploit is the gold trade and being able to convert the illicit finances into gold and sell that gold quickly and at a good price in various different markets across the world where there's a high demand, is also another key way that they can launder money. So, you've got an incredibly sophisticated end of the spectrum that in this instance was sitting in the UAE and outside of the United Kingdom, and then you've got an end of the spectrum that feels

OFFICIAL

OFFICIAL

a little bit more straightforward. Right? So, going round various different cities, collecting bundles of cash and consolidating those bundles of cash, getting them in suitcases and then getting them out of the country.

SIO IAN TRUBY [00:21:42] Crime generates cash. Cash is hard to get rid of. We have a fairly, fairly strict regime in this country around cash being put into a bank will be used to purchase things. So, it's got to go offshore. It's got to be put somewhere else. If you couldn't launder the money or use the money to buy more illicit product, you wouldn't bother, would you? Well, that's the bottom line. It's only done for money. So that's why it's important and that's why it's high on the NCA agenda, and high on other law enforcement agencies' agenda.

NARRATOR [00:22:13] And what kind of methods was Alfasasi using to launder his money?

SIO IAN TRUBY [00:22:17] He arranged the physical movement of the cash, the consolidation of the cash in the UK and the removal of the cash to the UAE. It would then appear that it was changed again from Sterling or Euros into local currency Dirhams. Those Dirhams were then put into his personal bank accounts or some companies under his control. We know gold was purchased. You know, if it's been turned into gold bullion, that's a really, really nice vehicle for criminals. Sits in a vault, changes ownership. No one needs to touch it or move it, but the value is transferred.

SAL MELKI [00:22:47] The things that's really interesting, it was a token based system that was used. So, tokens are often used in money laundering and these are effectively a sort of form of trust. So, I have a token in the in the country or city that I'm in, and that token corresponds to something that somebody else has, and that could be in a different country, different part of the UK. And that effectively is a symbol that I have received the money that we want to be laundered. That enables the release of funds on the other side of the chain. And what we found for the Operation Brightly was actually there was a huge amount of trust involved in this sophisticated network that was proven to be laundering in excess of £100 million of British sterling, and that was surprising, just how much trust was involved in that system and methodology. So, yeah, super sophisticated end of the spectrum and also quite a low sophistication end of the spectrum with effectively getting,

OFFICIAL

OFFICIAL

getting cash in suitcases and getting it out of the country with the least amount of suspicion as possible.

NARRATOR [00:23:46] One example of tokens used by Alfalasi was the serial number of a bank note. One party will retain the original note, while the other party will be sent a serial number so they know the cash is coming from the right place. Before the suitcases were checked in bound for the UAE, the cash had to be collected using the token system at handover points across London.

SIO IAN TRUBY [00:24:05] The criminal gangs would go to a prearranged place. Those bags were then taken to central London Flats, largely mansion flats, probably Airbnbs. We never actually got the full address for these places, but certainly from where the driver was told to go to pick the suitcases up, they are in mansion blocks in places like Maida Vale and the West End. The cash was tipped out and we've got a film of this, it came out in the trial. The holdalls, the carrier bags are literally tipped out on the floor and then the cash is repackaged into the suitcase. Records are made, of which drop, so the drop would be that cash handover within the UK going to which piece of luggage and then that's reconciled when the cash gets to the UAE. So, we did get from Tara Hanlon's suitcase, obviously the people in the UK filmed what they were doing to share with the people expecting in the UAE. Someone's got cash. Yeah, meet my person at such and such a place. That's then taken to the central consolidation point and they do what needs to be done to get it out to Dubai through the Courier network.

NARRATOR [00:25:16] For Manisha Prajapati and her team, the information extracted from Alfalasi mobile phones was just the beginning of the investigation.

MANISHA PRAJAPATI [00:25:23] Where did the money come from? Getting forensics done on the cash. Does he have the means to carry that much money? Has he declared the money in the UK? Is he going to declare the money to where it was intended to go, which in this case is Dubai, as along with the case in October. So, there's a whole range of investigative strategies in place looking at the whole picture.

NARRATOR [00:25:45] That whole picture involved a complex mapping of the relationships between Alfalasi and the couriers, a crime network diagram that brought together the links between all the key players and suspects.

OFFICIAL

OFFICIAL

MANISHA PRAJAPATI [00:25:57] How many other people had he or Michelle Clark purchased tickets for? From that, we identified, I think, as the investigation team, we identified at least 30 other couriers, both British and Czech nationals.

NARRATOR [00:26:14] Next came the task of investigating each of the couriers personal finances to build a picture of where their income came from.

MANISHA PRAJAPATI [00:26:22] You can tell a lot by looking through someone's finances. You are spying on their life through how they spend their money and how they make their money. So, you can tell a lot about a person and how they see the world and deal with the world looking at their bank account.

NARRATOR [00:26:38] There are several British laws that protect your financial information. That means Manisha and her team had to jump over several hurdles to get the data and numbers they needed.

MANISHA PRAJAPATI [00:26:48] What we're asking banks to do is breach their confidentiality with their customers to give us information. So that requires a court order to do that. They will give us basic information from confirming who the account holder is, that the account, an account is active or if they've got any concerns about an account. But if we want to go any further than that, then it's an application to a judge to say, can we have material held by the bank, which they've confirmed they hold so that we can retrieve it and they have almost like a defense in place to breach data protection in order to assist law enforcement.

SAL MELKI [00:27:26] So what we've found through various different operations and system learning, so learning from our partners, not just in the UK but also internationally, is that there is a group of individuals and networks that are incredibly well connected and really sophisticated, and these operate in almost a different way from any other money laundering network that we see because of the scale. So, you know, being able to turn over hundreds of millions and sometimes billions of British sterling in laundered currency, but also the sophistication that they operate under. So these would be more akin to, I guess, a professional organisation than what we might think is a sort of traditional organised crime group.

OFFICIAL

OFFICIAL

NARRATOR [00:28:10] And what happens to the money that's recovered once you've got it?

SIO IAN TRUBY [00:28:14] Under UK legislation you can take action just against cash you suspect is the proceeds of crime. So, in parallel to our criminal investigation, we had cash seizures. So you seize the cash. 48 hours later you go to a magistrate and a magistrate will determine you do have grounds to suspect and therefore you need time to investigate and they'll order the continued detention of the cash. You'll get to a point where you've investigated the origin or the intended use of that cash, and then you can make an application to the court for its forfeiture. Now any interested party in the cash can make representations and can provide material to show that the cash is legitimate, and if they do, you might have a contested court hearing and the judge will decide whether it is or isn't. That's on the balance of probability test, which is a slightly lower evidential test than we have in criminal trials, which we don't say beyond reasonable doubt anymore. But effectively, that's what we have in a criminal trial for these civil proceedings because it's done in the magistrates under a civil regime. It's just that balance of probability. On the balance of probabilities, this is criminal cash or was it intended for use in crime? As I say, anybody that wants to challenge the assertion can do so and we can have a contest over is it is it wasn't it?

DAVID BOWERS [00:29:29] My sort of working hypothesis was that he married into a very wealthy family over there. I can only assume that he needed to show that he was able to bring money in and ultimately ended up doing it by turning to criminality in order to do so.

SIO IAN TRUBY [00:29:46] It can only be for for the money and unfortunately, you know, I've seen this with criminals before, even though they've got more money than most people would have to spend a lifetime, they still chase more. The more you get, the more you want. It's very strange. So, I think that that's all I can put it down to, whether he was trying to impress his family. As I said, my understanding is he didn't actually come from particular wealth himself, but he married into a very wealthy family and it could have just been he was trying to impress the old... relatives, really don't know. But it is just pure greed. It's just it's there. It's easy. I can get away with it. I'll take the money.

OFFICIAL

OFFICIAL

DAVID BOWERS [00:30:20] Part of his downfall was because he'd arranged it all on his mobile phone, he was paying through his credit cards, what he liked to, we assumed he liked to travel first class. So, the flights had been Emirates business classes going out. He'd arranged them Emirates business class because they were able to take heavier amounts of suitcases out on the business flights. Whereas if they had traveled economy class, they would be restricted to less baggage. So he'd booked business class on the way out, but in doing so he was accruing points on his own Emirates loyalty card, and we believe part of the reason that he wanted to do that was because he was booking so many tickets, it was giving him more and more points, which he wanted to save for his own travel. So, ultimately his interest in his greed in putting in points on his own Emirates card partially led to his downfall because we were able to trace it easily through his accounts.

SIO IAN TRUBY [00:31:15] Mr. Alfalasi was prosecuted. He pleaded guilty. He's been sentenced to nine years, seven months, last July 2022. As I said, this was very widespread. It wasn't just the UK.

NARRATOR [00:31:28] And so you're hopeful that you'll be able to get those assets?

SIO IAN TRUBY [00:31:30] Yes. So, the way the system works is you go to court, you say this is what we think, this is what we say the benefit is. This is what we say his realisable assets are so what he could turn into money if he had to. You have a little bit of a bunfight with his representatives. The court determines, yes, your benefit is X you have Y in terms of assets. You must realise those assets pay those into the central government coffers or face a longer term in prison. So it is very useful and quite powerful legislation to de incentivise criminal conduct.

MANISHA PRAJAPAT [00:32:00] The seized cash, a court orders the forfeiture of that money. The money then goes into the Home Office and a portion of it is then reallocated to the National Crime Agency. Part of it then goes into the Treasury to assist funding generally. So back to the public, to the people, and part of it is put into a fund where law enforcement agencies can apply to get equipment, training and the rest of it.

SIO IAN TRUBY [00:32:27] In the cash seizures we got on this. So four hundred and thirty from a guy called Ilias, the 1.9 million from Tara and the 1.4 million from Zdenek Kamaryt. Nobody came forward to say it's legitimate money. It's come from a business. It was to be

OFFICIAL

OFFICIAL

used in a business. So the applications we made to the court in respect of that cash were all uncontested and the orders were made.

SAL MELKI [00:32:53] And one of the things that we're really keen to impress on in money laundering is it's not just numbers on a spreadsheet, it's real world harm. And actually all of the money that's being laundered has been derived from drugs trade. Drugs trade is propped up by serious violence. Human trafficking, human trafficking propped up by serious violence. Proceeds of fraud causing huge harm in the community, things such as ransomware, which is growing exponentially and stealing innocent people's money. And so it's really important to come back to this main notion that we can't see the people dealing with the money as any different to the types of criminality that they facilitate.

SIO IAN TRUBY [00:33:32] We got charging decisions against a number of people. We've charged 16 people with these offences. Four people have pleaded guilty. We successfully prosecuted four more, four more face trial later this year and then two more after that.

MANISHA PRAJAPAT [00:33:48] This is the largest money laundering investigation that I have worked on. Other ones have been around £40 million. This one, I believe, looking at the unknown is probably in excess of 200 million. If we look at all the European couriers that were also involved, perhaps even more, I think, looking at the finances of Abdullah Alfalasi that I have had access to it looks like this has been an operation since 2017, 2018, so maybe more than 200 million.

SIO IAN TRUBY [00:34:25] Class A drugs are harmful. People do get addicted. If it's cigarettes, it undermines UK health policies. If it's counterfeit goods, the health and safety implications and all of that that's involved in that as well. So there is a real impact, it does cause harm. The other aspects of this is we've identified again from what we found on Mr. Alfalasi's phone, a lot of this cash was being invested into gold, gold which had been mined in Africa, and for which there was a lot of false documentation created indicating that it's been illegally mined and that will involve human exploitation, that will involve the use of chemicals which cause untold environmental damage. So it just knocks on in so many different ways. It does have harm at all sorts of levels. Individuals, families, communities and environment. This is a huge case for, for the NCA. The amount of money moved, 110 million over effectively a year, 18 months is just phenomenal. Bearing in mind,

OFFICIAL

OFFICIAL

in the middle of that, we also had lockdown. So this is really significant. This is a lot of criminal money. This represents serious organized crime at its highest level.

OFFICIAL

