

CHILDREN AS YOUNG AS ONE LOCKED IN SHIPPING CONTAINER

Thirteen children aged as young as one were among the Afghan immigrants rescued from a shipping container it emerged last night. The illegal immigrants found trapped inside the container at an Essex dockyard after they were heard screaming for help may have been locked inside it for days, it was disclosed. Police said the 35 men, women and children were Sikhs from Afghanistan, indicating they may have travelled thousands of miles in terrible conditions. The oldest was 72.

One man was found dead inside the container at the Port of Tilbury early on Saturday morning after screams were heard from the increasingly desperate migrants, who were suffering from hypothermia and severe dehydration. Police began a homicide investigation to track down those responsible. Experts suggested they were likely to be commercial people smugglers rather than criminal gangs trafficking people against their will. Police began to interview the survivors yesterday as 30 were discharged from hospital.

Essex police said: "Now we understand they are from Afghanistan and are of the Sikh faith. We have had a good deal of help from partners within the local Sikh community in the Tilbury area to ensure that these poor people, who would have been through a horrific ordeal, are supported in terms of their religious and clothing needs." He added: "The welfare and health of the people is our priority at this stage. Now they are well enough, our officers will be speaking to them via interpreters so we can piece together what happened."

Belgian police said they believed the immigrants were already inside the container when it was dropped at Zeebrugge port before crossing the North Sea aboard a P&O freighter. A spokesman for the federal police in Belgium said it appeared to be 'impossible' for the Afghans to have been loaded into the container during the hour it spent at Zeebrugge. Investigators have been viewing CCTV footage and were 'very hopeful' they would track down the vehicle that brought the container and its driver.

Glenn Rankin, an expert in anti-human trafficking measures, said the immigrants could have been deposited in the container in a quiet location near Zeebrugge, or alternatively, had travelled a great distance inside the sealed unit. "There have been cases where the authorities have found people in very poor conditions after having been in containers for days," said Mr Rankin. "The facilitators whoever they are may have secreted these people in the container perhaps at a motorway service station." The Sikhs of Afghanistan are one of the world's smallest and most vulnerable minorities. Numbering no more than a few hundred families, they have endured persecution in a country that is 99 per cent Muslim.

INDIA'S EXPLOITED CHILD COTTON WORKERS

The noise was deafening and air in the factory in northern Gujarat was so thick with cotton dust it was like a snowstorm at night. Women and girls, some no more than 10 or 11, fed machines with raw cotton picked from the nearby fields.

It is a process known as ginning - one end of a commercial supply chain that ends up as clothes and textiles in high street shops around the world. Globally, annual revenues from the industry are measured in the trillions of dollars. Many household-name retailers do not know exactly how the cotton they use is farmed and processed.

"The workers' lives are terrible," said Mevani, an activist. "They are not paid the minimum wage. There are no safety precautions. There are many children." ...Children were easy to find in both the ginning factories and the cotton fields... Versha and Pryanka were both 11 years old, far away from home and too shy or frightened to speak. They had been sent there through a labour agent by their parents."They don't get paid. The money must go straight to their parents."

Some estimates put the number of cotton child workers in India as high as half a million. "A third of the workers may be children ... Children are at every stage of the process, seeding cotton, picking it and ginning and beyond, too" says Mr Katiyar, who runs the Campaigning organisation Prayas Centre for Labor Research and Action. He refers to the cotton dust in the ginning factories as "the horror of the white cloud", as it can cause lung disease at an early age. By law, he says, masks and safety equipment should be provided to all workers. Children should not work until they are 16. There have been cases of them suffocating in the piles of raw cotton. Workers are paid just over \$2 a day, when they should be paid \$7 for a 12-hour shift.

Mandhana Industries is a supplier to many European brands. Its plant is clean and modern. Staff wear protective masks and clothing. "We have a social programme," says Mandhana president Mr Bhatnagar. "We have doctors and health care... Our customers are happy with the way we operate." But little or no scrutiny is made of the ginning factories and cotton fields...Marks and Spencer said it did not break down what percentage of its raw cotton was traceable and guaranteed to be free of unacceptable labour practices. "All our suppliers must adhere to our ethical standards"... The company intends to be able to trace the source of its cotton by 2015.

Child labour has been reported in all the major cotton growing countries - China, India, Pakistan, Brazil, Uzbekistan and Turkey.

JUST 13, AND WORKING RISKY 12-HOUR SHIFTS IN THE TOBACCO FIELDS

On many mornings, as tobacco plants tower around her, Saray Cambray Alvarez pulls a black plastic garbage bag over her 13-year-old body to protect her skin from leaves dripping with nicotine-tinged dew.

When Saray and other workers — including several more teenagers — get to the fields at 6, they punch holes through the bags for their arms. They are trying to avoid what is known as “green tobacco sickness,” or nicotine poisoning, which can cause vomiting, dizziness and irregular heart rates, among other symptoms.

Saray says that she sometimes has trouble breathing in the middle of all the heat, humidity and leaves, and that she often feels weary during her 12-hour shifts, when she moves through the rows to pluck unwanted flowers or pull off oversize leaves for the harvest.(...)

At 16, she is spending her third summer in the tobacco fields. “I didn’t throw up, but other people did.”

For years, public health experts have sought to bar teenagers under 16 from the tobacco fields, citing the grueling hours and the harmful exposure to nicotine and other chemicals, but their efforts have been blocked. Three years ago, Hilda Solis, then the labor secretary, proposed declaring work in tobacco fields and with tractors hazardous — making that type of work illegal for those under 16. Opponents of child labor note that Brazil, India and some other tobacco-producing nations already prohibit anyone under 18 from working on tobacco farms.

The Obama administration withdrew Ms. Solis’s proposed rule after encountering intense opposition from farm groups and Republican lawmakers. Agricultural organizations said the move would hurt family farms and make it harder for young people to learn farming skills.(...)

In the meantime, public health experts say hundreds of children under 16 like Saray continue to work in America’s tobacco fields. Dr. Thomas A. Arcury, an expert on tobacco and migrant workers said tobacco work was particularly harmful to children: “They’re not small adults, they’re children,” he said. “They have more surface area to body mass. They’re still developing neurologically. Their reproductive systems are developing.”

Federal law allows those 12 and older to work on farms for unlimited hours, as long as there is no conflict with school. For nonfarm work, federal law sets 14 as the minimum age and restricts work for children under 16 to eight hours a day.

Tobacco growers say that the practice of using young teenagers is rare, and that many growers decline to employ anyone under 16. But interviews with many teenagers and experts suggest that the practice is still prevalent. Many of the young workers are immigrants or children of migrant workers, whose families often have few employment options and are struggling to make ends meet.