

FACEBOOK helps sell children for perverts

Trafficking gangs 'offer discounts for children' in ads for deadly boat journeys on Facebook

The human smuggling gangs peddle their services like travel agents across social media, with 539 pages referred to Europol by British police last year

By **Ben Glaze** Deputy Political Editor

In reality, refugees and economic migrants clamber aboard ramshackle wooden and inflatable boats, packed tightly together for the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean from the North African coast (stock photo) (Image: REUTERS)

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People traffickers use Facebook to sell desperate migrants trips to Europe which often end in death, Theresa May warned EU chiefs.

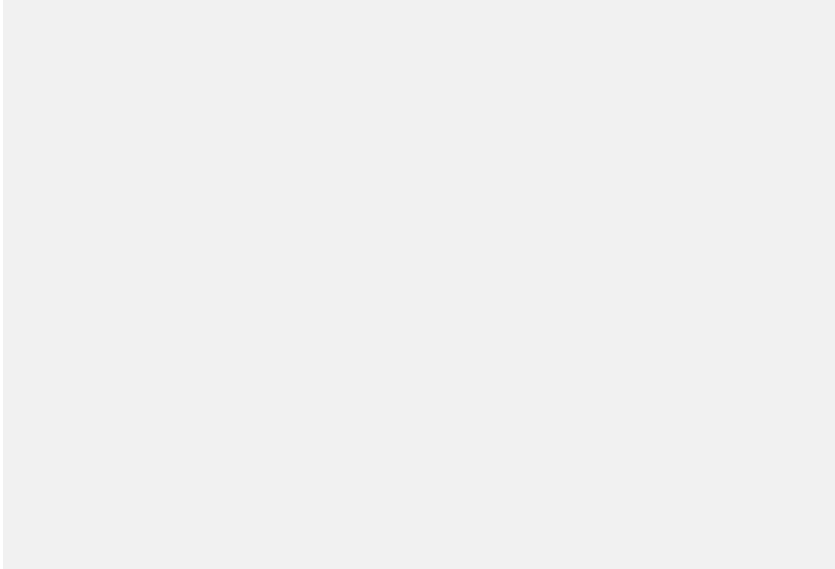
The human smuggling gangs peddle their services like travel agents across social media, with 539 pages referred to Europol by British police last year. One page even offered discounts for children.

The Prime Minister urged EU leaders to confront social media sites hosting the sick ads over dinner in Salzburg.

She said tonight: "We must tackle the enabling environment – all those factors that make it far too easy for criminal networks to emerge and grow, putting migrants' lives at such risk."

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The Prime Minister urged EU leaders to confront social media sites hosting the sick ads over dinner in Salzburg (Image: REUTERS)

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The ads paint a picture of safe, comfortable travel to the EU.

But, in reality, refugees and economic migrants clamber aboard ramshackle wooden and inflatable boats, packed tightly together for the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean from the North African coast.

Most have no lifejackets and last year an estimated 3,500 migrants drowned attempting the crossing. About 1,000 victims had perished by June this year trying to reach the EU.

A senior UK official said of the social media posts: "They are appearing in a form that we would consider adverts and are clearly designed to make the idea of being smuggled into Europe an attractive and largely risk-free choice, which clearly it is not.

"That is why we want these things removing as soon as possible."

While some other social media sites also hosted ads for trafficking, the official added: "In the majority of cases we are aware of it has involved Facebook."

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The attack by the PM is the latest blow to Facebook, which has previously been accused of taking too long to take down child abuse images, far-right content and terrorist videos.

The tech giant has also faced claims of tax avoidance for switching revenues between different countries which, experts said, could be done to minimise tax payments.

It denies avoiding tax and insists it pays all money due. But in 2014, it forked out just £4,327 in Britain, and in 2016 it coughed up £5.1million on sales of £842million and £58million profit.

Earlier, EU Council President Donald Tusk hailed a fall in the number of illegal migrants making their way to Europe.

Numbers dropped from two million in 2015 to fewer than 100,000 this year.

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“This is less than in the years before the migration crisis,” he said as an informal EU summit got under way in the Austrian Alps. “Things are moving in the right direction.”

And in a thinly veiled rebuke to EU countries like Hungary, which has turned away migrants, he added: “We should focus on what works and just get on with it. We can no longer be divided into those who want to solve the problem of illegal migrant flow and those who want to use it for political gain.”

Last month the National Crime Agency accused Facebook of allowing people-smugglers to lure migrants to their deaths in the Mediterranean.

Britain's top law enforcement agency said the tech giant was failing to stop ads being posted by criminals.

It revealed it had found more than 800 Facebook pages linked to organised crime gangs involved in ferrying migrants into and across Europe for money.

Facebook could even be profiting from the brazen ads.

While the firm is not accused of accepting money directly from traffickers, it could benefit from desperate migrants clicking on to its website.

Customers using Facebook boost the firm's user figures, which can be used to sell advertising space to legitimate companies.

NCA deputy director Tom Dowdall said migrant deaths in the Mediterranean remained high –more than 1,500 so far this year – and that victims were too often being recruited via Facebook.

“They are being lured to their deaths using an application they are using every day of the week,” he said.

“Since December 2016, we have identified over 800 Facebook pages which we consider as being associated with organised immigration crime. That is largely offering vessels, documents, transport services.

“There is enough we are seeing to indicate to us that it supports criminality.”

Facebook insisted it was taking the problem seriously.

“People smuggling is illegal and any posts, pages or groups that coordinate this activity are not allowed on Facebook,” it said.

“We work closely with law enforcement agencies around the world, including Europol, to identify, remove and report illegal activity.”