

Gang attempts to smuggle £36m of cannabis

Members of an international gang, including Israeli organised criminals, were jailed today after they attempted to flood Britain with £36 million worth of cannabis.

Over several months the men, including British criminals from Leicester and members of a Serbian gang, were kept under surveillance by the Serious Organised Crime Agency (Soca) as they planned the huge operation involving 12.5 tonnes of the drug. Israeli law enforcement intercepted calls while Leicestershire police also helped keep track of some of the men as they arranged to bring a boat into Southampton loaded with cannabis. Investigators in seven other countries were also involved in the huge operation. The gang were arrested in April last year as their boat, Abbira, sat at Southampton docks. It took police several days to unload over 400 blocks of the drug which each measured over a foot in length. A senior source told The Times that every single space in the boat was filled, including the two fresh water tanks. "The boat was absolutely stuffed from top to bottom. Every panel that could be unscrewed had been and was full of cannabis." The crew had spent 28 days at sea since leaving Ceuta, in Morocco, via a secret coastal rendezvous with another boat off the coast of Morocco to pick up the drugs. The captain, 81-year-old Israeli Moshe Kedar, had been recruited as a "logistics man" by Israeli gang leaders Yehezkel Srebro, 57, and Mordechai Hersh, 67, and spent months preparing the illegal mission. Srebro and heavily-bearded Hersh had served substantial prison sentences after they were caught setting up an ecstasy factory in Holland in 1994. Investigators were surprised to discover Kedar's central role in the plot, especially as he had no criminal background. But today he, along with Srebro were sentenced to nine years while Hersh received eight years. Other members of the gang received between seven and 10 years. All the men were arrested in a series of co-ordinated dawn raids six days after they landed in Southampton. The swoop, the key moment of Operation Caroché, involved officers from Soca, Hampshire Police, Leicester Police, HM Revenue and Customs and UK Border Agency.