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Top Cops 'Protected' Traffickers, Interior Ministry Says

By Yekaterina Kravtsova

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Police walking through a market in Krasnoyarsk on Wednesday during an inspection, one of many nationwide checking for immigration violations. **Ilya Naymushin**

Two high-ranking police officers and a Federal Migration Service official were involved in a criminal scheme that brought illegal immigrants to Russia and forced them into slave labor, the Interior Ministry said Wednesday.

The announcement came as nationwide raids at markets continued for the second week, with hundreds detained in Moscow, resulting in an outdoor "tent camp" of mostly Vietnamese migrants. So many migrants have been detained that the Federal Migration Service on Tuesday announced plans to open nearly 100 new detention facilities nationwide.

Yet in a strange twist, it seems some of the illegal immigrants now in police detention were actually brought to Russia as part of a criminal scheme run with the approval of several police officers.

High-ranking officers in Moscow's Golyanovo district and Izmailovo district are now accused of partaking in corrupt activities and have already been fired, the Interior Ministry said in a statement.

The criminal scheme was discovered during a large-scale investigation into illegal immigration, an issue that was thrust into the spotlight after a violent encounter at Moscow's Matveyevsky market on July 27, when police officer Anton Kudryashov was beaten by two Dagestani vendors while trying to detain one of their relatives on suspicion of raping a 15-year-old girl.

While the two suspects in the attack were found to be Russian citizens, a subsequent inspection of the market revealed violations of immigration law and triggered a wave of similar inspections at other markets nationwide.

Yet the attack on Kudryashov revealed another pressing issue, one President Vladimir Putin himself angrily called attention to at a special meeting in the aftermath of the attack: corruption at markets.

Three of Kudryashov's colleagues were charged with negligence for doing nothing to stop the attack. Their inaction led many to believe that they'd been "bought off" by sellers at the market, paid bribes to let the workers get away with misdemeanor crimes.

In addition, Stanislav Solovyov, deputy head of Moscow's Ochakovo-Matveyevskoye police precinct, was detained on suspicion of extorting bribes for a total of at least 180,000 rubles ($5,470) from an unlicensed businessman at the Matveyevsky Market.

But while these revelations of corruption may have shocked some, analysts say corruption is a constant, ongoing problem, and it is only now taking center stage because of upcoming elections.

"Corruption at markets is a common practice and it may be implemented in a number of different ways, but the problem always come to the fore on the eve of elections, since that's the best way to make people vote for a certain candidate," said Yelena Panfilova, head of Transparency International in Russia.

"Nine out of 10 vendors are paying bribes to law enforcement authorities, and the level of corruption depends on the officer's rank — some of them control entire economic sectors, while some only control a tent or a group of tents [at the market]," Panfilova said.

"The usual scheme is 'You pay us and we will protect you,' and it is sometimes done through the market's administration, but other times they have a deal directly with vendors," she said.

Police have also been known to "look the other way" when presented with counterfeit registration documents of immigrants working at markets, she said, and sometimes they receive money to stay quiet about the workers' places of residence, where "instead of two registered people, there are a dozen of them living there."

Over the last two days, at least seven people were detained and charged for organizing illegal immigration after providing foreigners who have no legal right to be on Russian territory with accommodation, police said.

It seems the Investigative Committee's check for corrupt ties to law enforcement at markets has been fruitful.

But analysts say the real victims in the campaign against illegal immigration are the immigrants themselves, with hundreds of them currently awaiting deportation in a tent camp in Eastern Moscow. According to human rights activists, some of those detained have a legal right to be in Russia.

Police haven't announced the exact number of those detained in the raids, but one raid alone saw some 1,400 people detained. Most of them were from Vietnam — the supplier country in the trafficking scheme that several police officers were reportedly involved in.

Rights activists have complained that conditions at the tent camp are poor. Svetlana Gannushkina, head of Civil Assistance, a human rights group, asked the Investigative Committee and the Prosecutor General's Office to open a criminal case into the detention of immigrants in the camp.

Police said earlier that conditions in the camp were much better than those in which the immigrants lived while in slavery, however.

Some say it is no coincidence that two of the hottest issues have come to the foreground ahead of Moscow's mayoral election.

"The beating of a police officer trying to detain a man has been blown out of proportion for the election campaign; police always encounter problems while detaining a criminal, regardless of nationality, but nothing brings in as much votes as fighting corruption and racial strife," former police officer Dmitry Kotelnikov said by phone.

"But look how they handle these problems — by detaining Russian officers and Vietnamese workers," he said.

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