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Pregnant British Teen Could Face 15 Years in Georgian Jail Over £200k Drug Smuggling Case

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— Categories: Crime



A 19-year-old British woman who vanished while on holiday in Thailand is now facing a possible 15-year prison sentence in Georgia after being caught with a large quantity of cannabis in her luggage, according to Georgian authorities.

Bella May Culley, from Billingham in Teesside, was arrested in May at Tbilisi International Airport, where border officers discovered £200,000 worth of cannabis and hashish hidden

in her bags. The arrest followed a cross-border manhunt that began when she was reported missing during a solo trip in Southeast Asia. Culley, who is now pregnant, maintains that she was coerced into transporting the drugs by a criminal gang in Thailand.

Despite her claims, Georgian prosecutors insist the smuggling was carefully planned. Vakhtang Tsaluqelashvili, a spokesperson for the prosecution, said: “We have evidence confirming that the defendant acted with prior intent. She passed through several airports, and at no stage did she display any such, let’s say, position or behaviour that would make us think this was not an intentional crime.”

He added: “Among other things, at the moment of her arrest, she did not say anything of this kind to the Georgian customs officers either. Given the gravity of the offence committed, the minimum expected sentence is 15 years, even taking into account the mitigating circumstances.”

Culley claims she was subjected to abuse and intimidation before the journey. According to her account, she was burned with a hot iron and shown a video of a beheading by the Thai gang that allegedly forced her to carry the drugs to Georgia. She says she had no knowledge of Georgia or its location and tried to raise the alarm at the airport in Bangkok. However, CCTV footage reportedly shows no such attempt to alert authorities before boarding her flight.

Culley was found to be pregnant after a short relationship with a British man during the earlier part of her travels. She confirmed in court last week that she is expecting a baby boy.

Her legal team is hoping for a plea deal. Culley’s lawyer argued that his client was under duress and unaware of the drugs hidden in the luggage. “There was no malicious intent on Bella’s part; she was pressured and forced, and there is irrefutable evidence of that,” he told Tbilisi City Court. “The bag wasn’t even locked, and it went through three countries and two continents, while Bella to this day is unaware whether Tbilisi is a country or a city.”

While the Georgian prosecution has not ruled out a plea bargain, Tsaluqelashvili confirmed that any deal is likely to include prison time or a suspended sentence with financial penalties.

Culley is due to appear again at Tbilisi City Court on September 2. Her case has drawn attention both in the UK and internationally, particularly given her young age, claims of

coercion, and the fact that she is now carrying a child.

It remains to be seen whether Georgian authorities will show leniency in light of the circumstances or whether the strict laws on drug smuggling will lead to a lengthy custodial sentence.