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Cartels Flood UK Waters with Cocaine as 'Mother Ships' Evade Detection

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Drug cartels from South America are increasingly using covert maritime methods to smuggle vast quantities of cocaine into the UK, exploiting commercial cargo ships known as 'mother ships' that drop drug loads at sea before slipping away undetected.

Authorities have issued renewed warnings as the use of this tactic, known as the 'at-sea drop-off' (ASDO) method, surges around British waters. These operations involve cartels concealing bales of cocaine aboard container ships, which approach British waters before

jettisoning the illicit cargo into the sea. Each bale is fitted with flotation devices and GPS trackers, allowing smaller criminal boats to retrieve them under the cover of darkness.

The National Crime Agency (NCA) confirmed it launched 60 ASDO-related investigations last year alone. These efforts led to the seizure of nearly five tonnes of cocaine, 34 arrests, and sentences totalling over 226 years. Despite these successes, authorities warn the threat is growing, with traffickers increasingly exploiting the UK's 11,000 miles of vulnerable coastline.

One of the most high-profile cases involved the interception of the MV Matthew, a Panamanian cargo ship, in the Irish Sea. The dramatic operation saw Ireland's elite Army Ranger Wing descend by helicopter onto the vessel following a joint operation with the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). More than two tonnes of cocaine, worth £132 million, were recovered in what became the largest drug seizure in Irish history. Eight men were sentenced on July 4, allowing the full details of the mission to be made public.

Closer to home, four men were jailed last week after trying to collect cocaine worth £18 million off the coast of Cornwall. The drugs had been dropped into the sea by a passing cargo vessel. The men were spotted retrieving the bales and attempted to outrun Border Force patrols in a 28-mile pursuit before beaching at Gwynver, near Sennen. They were eventually apprehended and prosecuted at Truro Crown Court.

The smuggling operation involved using tracking devices, including Apple AirTags, to help locate the bales. Only eleven of the planned 20 packages were recovered, with some ditched during the chase. The group included a financially struggling Hampshire fisherman, three Essex men believed to be part of the distribution network, and a Colombian national thought to be a security link for the cartel.

The ASDO method poses significant challenges due to the scale and concealment involved. Packages are often abandoned mid-operation if smugglers believe they are under surveillance. In some cases, bales of cocaine have washed ashore months later. Last September, 40 kilograms of the drug were discovered on Trevaunance Cove in Cornwall. In another case, 30 kilograms washed up on a beach in Goring, West Sussex.

Further inland, cocaine-filled holdalls have been found along the Dorset coastline and on the Isle of Wight. These discoveries often follow rough weather or failed smuggling missions.

The Border Force has deployed more than two dozen patrol vessels, RHIBs, jet skis, and sniffer dogs trained for sea operations to counter this threat. In January, a spaniel named Flash helped officers uncover £50 million worth of cocaine hidden in a banana shipment aboard a vessel intercepted off Dover. The packages had also been prepared for sea drop, complete with trackers.

Senior Border Force Director Duncan Capps said: "Border Force officers remain one step ahead of the criminal gangs threatening our border security as we continue to make record-breaking seizures to keep deadly drugs off our streets. Our message to these criminals is clear: more than ever before, we are using intelligence and international law enforcement co-operation to disrupt and dismantle smuggling operations. We will continue to work with law enforcement to ensure those caught smuggling will face the full force of the law."

The NCA added that its investigations are not limited to the UK coastline. Efforts are underway with international partners to track the cartels from source countries and dismantle the global networks involved in orchestrating these drug deliveries.

With coastal communities urged to stay vigilant and report suspicious activity, the UK's fight against maritime drug smuggling remains intense. As cartels refine their techniques, authorities stress the need for ongoing public awareness and multi-agency coordination to stay one step ahead.