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Cannabis Gang Exploits Abandoned Shopping Centre for £1.8m Drug Operation

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Three Albanian nationals have pleaded guilty to running a large-scale cannabis factory inside a derelict shopping centre in Irvine, Scotland. The operation, valued at up to £1.8 million, involved over 3,000 cannabis plants and extensive infrastructure designed to avoid detection. The men, all of whom had previously encountered UK law enforcement, are now facing substantial prison sentences.

Appearing at the High Court in Glasgow on 5 August 2025, Elton Skenderi (30), Gjovalin Toma (31), and Eduard Daja (39) admitted their roles in the industrial production of

cannabis, a Class B controlled substance under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. The factory was uncovered by police in September 2024 following a tip-off from Scottish Power, which noticed unusual levels of energy usage at the former Forum Shopping Centre.

Prosecutor Stewart Ronnie told the court that the operation spanned two floors and included neighbouring units within the abandoned complex. Entry had been secured with reinforced doors and monitored with CCTV equipment. Police found makeshift living quarters complete with cooking facilities, bedding, and personal effects, suggesting the men had been living on-site while maintaining the illegal plantation.

A total of 3,058 cannabis plants were seized, with the street value estimated between £611,600 and £1,834,800. Evidence presented to the court included forensic material linking Skenderi and Daja to the premises, such as fingerprints and DNA on grooming tools. The men had initially refused to provide information regarding possible links to human trafficking during police questioning.

Judge Lord Mulholland described the case as “criminality on an industrial scale”, condemning the defendants for abusing the country’s legal systems. “You have all come here to receive the benefits available from living here, and this is how you treat the country,” he stated during the hearing.

Daja, who had previously been deported to Albania in July 2023 under the Facilitated Returns Scheme (FRS), managed to re-enter the UK undetected and resumed criminal activity. The FRS, introduced in 2006, is designed to speed up the removal of foreign nationals convicted of crimes in Britain. Despite having served an eight-month sentence for cannabis cultivation in Leeds in 2023, Daja was found at the crime scene and admitted breaching his deportation order.

Toma had also served time in Leeds in 2022 for similar offences and was issued with a removal notice. However, the court heard he later submitted an asylum claim, which remains unresolved.

All three defendants were remanded in custody as sentencing was deferred for background reports. Authorities continue to face questions about how individuals with prior convictions and removal orders were able to return to the UK and set up a multi-million-pound drug enterprise.