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'MAJOR BLOW' TO DRUG AND FIREARM NETWORK AS 32 ARRESTED IN THREE COUNTRIES

Interviews available

Simultaneous dawn raids across Europe this morning have resulted in the arrest of 32 people.

750 officers were involved in an international operation run from command centres in Malaga, London and Dublin. The target was a criminal network suspected of trafficking huge quantities of drugs and firearms and of laundering hundreds of millions of pounds in criminal profits.

In the UK, around 230 SOCA officers searched business and residential premises. Nine men and two women were arrested and are now being questioned by SOCA at police stations in the Thames Valley, Kent and the West Midlands.

The man believed to be the head of the network, a 53-year-old Irish born British national living in Malaga, was arrested on the Costa del Sol - along with family members, other British and Irish nationals and four Spanish lawyers - by officers from the Spanish National Police's Central Unit for Economic and Fiscal Crime Money Laundering Squad. The twenty individuals arrested in Spain are being held for questioning at a police station in Malaga.

Residential and business premises were also searched in Ireland, Belgium, Cyprus and Brazil. Officers from the Garda National Drugs Unit are questioning one man at a police station in Dublin.

Officers are seeking further suspects in the UK, Spain and Ireland.

The Belgian Police, Europol, and a number of other law enforcement agencies were also involved in today's operation. SOCA received assistance in the UK from the Metropolitan Police, Thames Valley Police, Kent Police and West Midlands Police.

SOCA's Trevor Pearce said:

"This scale of this joint operation by law enforcement agencies from so many countries is an indication of how prolific we think this network was. Today's arrests will have dealt a major blow to an organised criminal business suspected of supplying drugs and guns to gangs in cities across the UK and Europe. It highlights SOCA's role in coordinating complex investigations into organised crime, which always has an international dimension.

"We also believe this network has been offering a global investment service, ploughing hundreds of millions of pounds of dirty cash into offshore accounts, companies, and property on behalf of criminals. A financial investigation is already underway."

Garda Commissioner Fachtna Murphy said:

"This is an extensive and focused investigation into organised criminal activity targetting drug trafficking, money laundering and firearms crime. Over a significant period of time An Garda Síochána has engaged in the highest levels of cooperation and partnership with law enforcement colleagues in a number of key countries including the Spanish National Police, SOCA in the United Kingdom and the Belgians culminating in today's operation."

Notes to Editors

UK arrests: a 42-year-old man from Datchet, Slough; a 40-year-old woman from Sutton Coldfield; a 69-year-old man from Westerham, Kent; a 38-year-old man from Headlington, Oxford; a 29-year-old woman from Sonning Common, Reading; a 43-year-old man from Canterbury, Kent; a 34-year-old man from Perivale Greenford, Middlesex; a 42-year-old man from Tamworth; and a 42-year-old man from Wandsworth Common, London. Two other men were arrested at premises in Middlesex and London.

**For more information, or to request an interview with Trevor Pearce,
please contact the SOCA press office on 0870 268 8100**