



The 7,000-mile trip Britain's stolen cars are now taking

Gangs steal high-value British vehicles to order and ship them as far as Uganda, with the help of corrupt officials.
ZOE FLOOD in Nairobi investigates a sophisticated operation

The black Audi Q7 vanished when heavy snow covered Britain's South-east, shortly before Christmas in 2010. Four-and-a-half years later it appeared again, in a parking lot in the outskirts of the Ugandan capital, Kampala.

In a small village just outside Maidstone in Kent, Martin McSwiney, his wife and their four children were in their beds when noises woke the couple almost five years ago. "There was very bad snow and my driveway is quite steep, so one of the cars was struggling to get down it," Mr McSwiney remembered. "I ran downstairs to find the front door open."

Thieves had broken into the McSwineys' home, stolen keys to the two family cars and driven off with both of them. An Audi A6 was recovered that night, but the second – the Audi Q7 – had gone. When British police found the Q7 while on the trail of a stolen Lexus in Kampala, officers also found Range Rovers, BMWs, Mercedes and even a Nissan Micra – all stolen from Britain.

British police and their East African partners seized stolen UK cars worth more than £1m in Uganda in June. The record haul reveals how organised criminal networks are stealing high-value British vehicles to order and shipping

them overseas, an established supply line that police warn is getting worse.

"We began to see an increase in the number of cars being stolen last autumn," Paul Stanfield, regional manager for east and southern Africa in the Intelligence and Operations Directorate of the UK's National Crime Agency, told *The Independent*. "A conservative estimate of the total value of motor vehicles stolen across England and Wales in the first three months of 2015 is around £100m, although not all are exported."

"The route from London to Kampala has been there for several years but we've seen a spike more recently," said Mr Stanfield, with the majority of thefts taking place in London and the south-east. The pathways out of the UK usually lead through the country's container ports, such as Felixstowe and Southampton.

Stolen vehicles are often presented as "personal goods" on container manifests and sometimes covered up with

items such as furniture. Mr Stanfield says that outside Britain there are "elements in customs" working with the gangs. "to help get the cars through".

A multi-agency initiative targeting UK ports led to the seizure of another £1.2m worth of vehicles last September and more vehicles are being intercepted. Detective Constable Nathan Ricketts of the National Vehicle Crime Intelligence Service intercepts up to a dozen vehicles a month at Southampton.

"Of these around half have already been stolen and the rest are in the process of being stolen through fraudulent finance agreements," he said. "Over the year as a whole, 80-85 per cent of the vehicles I've intercepted have been destined for East Africa."

But, with on average 9,000 container movements per day at UK ports and just a handful of police officers focused on the problem, finding stolen vehicles in transit is difficult. Once they leave the country, they are harder to locate. The major haul in Uganda came only after police followed a high-tech tracking device on a Lexus RX450. The Lexus' journey shows the complexity of the network and the complicity of some officials.

A prestige hire vehicle managed by asset protection firm

APU Ltd, the Lexus first left the UK in April for France. A month later, further intelligence located the car in Oman, by which point all parties had accepted that it must have been stolen. Not long after it was shipped to the Kenyan port of Mombasa.

"When we reported it stolen, the potential for the car to be used in a covert operation



became apparent," said Neil Thomas, a director of APU Ltd. "Our intelligence could give the police detail of the route that it was travelling. We had a £50,000 car that we needed to get back, but we could also help the authorities dismantle the gang."

Police tracked the Lexus as it was transported overland from Mombasa across the Ugandan border to Kampala. At some point on this last leg, the Lexus became a legal entity again and was transferred to a bonded warehouse controlled by the Uganda Revenue Authority.

DC Ricketts was one of the experts who travelled to Kampala in pursuit of the Lexus. "We knew there would be lots out there but we didn't expect to be so easy," he said. "Once we got there [to the bonded warehouses] it was like shooting fish in a barrel."

"All of the high-value vehicles were stolen and none were well hidden. The number-plates were missing and the Vehicle Identification Numbers had been ground away, but there were still dealership stickers that quite obviously showed 'Manchester' and other UK locations," he said, of the 28 stolen vehicles seized.

"It's pretty strange to see a brand-new Range Rover Sport from Britain with 2,000 miles on the clock sitting in a dusty lot in Uganda."

The British police have been working with their Ugandan counterparts to have the vehicles repatriated to the UK. "We previously didn't have the law enforcement efforts to understand these syndicates," Asan Kasinye, assistant inspector general of Police and director for Interpol and International Relations in Uganda, told *The Independent*. "Across East Africa, the problem is big. I believe we would also find vehicles stolen from the UK in Rwanda, Tanzania, Kenya and South Sudan, as well as the Democratic Republic of Congo where law enforcement is limited."

"We are dealing with very well-organised syndicates, transporters and people within our system who register vehicles. We need cooperation across the region [and] with colleagues in the UK."

These transcontinental criminal networks seriously affect victims at both ends of the supply chain. A 49-year-old Ugandan surgeon last year paid a used car import company US\$67m (over £15,000)

Kampala, where British police are working with their Ugandan counterparts to repatriate stolen cars

Stolen vehicles recovered at UK ports. Vehicles worth £1.2m were recovered at British ports in



up-front for a Toyota Prado. "When I picked it up, they had paid the taxes – it had registration plates and its paperwork cleared by Uganda Revenue Authority," the doctor, who wished to remain anonymous, told *The Independent*.

Five months later, in March this year, police stopped him as he drove to his farm. After scrutinising his documents, they asked him to step out of the vehicle. "The men roughed me up and dragged me to the ground. I was handcuffed and declared to have stolen the car from the UK."

"I was driven in an open police pick-up back to Kampala and locked up in a filthy police cell for several days without any formal charges or access to legal representation," he added. "I was not allowed to let my family know."

He was only released after colleagues came looking for him in need of his medical expertise, but it was some time before his name was cleared. "After I presented Interpol with the original papers, they called me to say that I was not a car thief but that I had bought a stolen car from an import company." Police are still holding the car, so the doctor has had to buy a new vehicle. He has also

filed a case of illegal arrest and incarceration and is trying to launch a case against the company that sold him the vehicle, something he describes as a painful process. "I will never in my life buy anything used again," he said.

Despite being covered by insurance, the McSwiney family in Kent also suffered. "Where we live is very isolated – the courtesy car was gone after a week and we had no way of both taking the kids to school and getting to work," said Mr McSwiney, who is a power engineer.

The family was relieved to hear the car had been recovered, although the insurance claim had effectively transferred ownership to the insurers. "It's not my car anymore, but I'm glad it's been found and they're cracking down on this circle," said Mr McSwiney.

"You feel violated when it's your own house. My son – who was seven at the time – was deeply affected by the robbery. Every night for eight months afterwards, he would go and check that the door was locked before going to bed. You don't realise how serious it is until it happens to you."

With additional reporting by Samson Ntale in Kampala, Uganda

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