

Lorry deaths: Father hears of son's fate from friend who had a narrow escape

Bereaved families face debt and poverty in Do Thanh, Vietnam

Richard Lloyd Parry | Michael Tatarski, Do Thanh, Vietnam

For some, the news came in the form of a phone call from a friend or acquaintance, another young Vietnamese at large in Europe. For others, it came via a message on Facebook. Le Minh Tuan heard about the death of his son from a man who narrowly escaped the same fate.

“There were four of them travelling together,” Mr Le told The Times in Do Thanh, a small town in north central Vietnam. “But the traffickers said there were too many of them, and so one of them jumped off.”

Mr Le's 30-year-old son, Le Van Ha, remained in the shipping container in which he would die that night, along with 38 others. It was the friend he left behind, after learning the terrible story of what had happened, who passed the news back to the families in Vietnam.

However they heard about it, people in Do Thanh knew within hours that it was their children who had perished. When the British police were still talking about Chinese victims, Do Thanh was facing up to the loss of sons, daughters, husbands and fathers.

Apart from the emotional trauma of the deaths, and the ghastly details of how they happened, the tragedy means economic ruin in a community in which illegal emigration to Britain is a well-established means of making a better life. According to local people, even the horror of what happened in Essex will not discourage more young Vietnamese from following the same path.

Vietnamese media say that 24 families in the province of Nghe An, where Do Thanh is located, and neighbouring Ha Tinh province have reported missing relatives whom they fear were in the container. It is no coincidence that the regions are some of the poorest in the country.

“It's just a form of gambling,” says Father Nguyen Quyen of the Phu Vinh Catholic Church, where three of those believed to have died in the container were parishioners. “Around here, unless you run a company or work for the government, you will not get a visa. So people choose the back door. And they will keep on doing whatever it takes to get on in life.”

In the houses of the missing, extended families gathered to weep and console one another before shrines bearing the photographs of their loved ones. One of them was Nguyen Dinh Tu, a 26-year-old father of two. Mr Nguyen was the youngest of six children who lived a hard, simple life.

His 78-year-old father has a rice field, which, at least when it was spared floods and typhoons, provided just about enough to feed the family, but with almost nothing left over. His family could not afford to pay for the youngest boy's high school, but, according to his aunt, Mr Nguyen borrowed 600 million dong (£20,000), from the bank and relatives to build a house for his young family.

To repay the debt, he paid a further 100 million dong to what his aunt calls a “company” in the capital, Hanoi, to travel to Romania to work. “He spent two months there,” his aunt, Nguyen Thi

Chin, says. “But he couldn’t make enough money, so he paid 500 million dong to go to Germany. But in Germany he was just washing dishes in a restaurant and earning almost nothing.”

His total debts now amounted to the equivalent of £40,000. In comparison, his father made about £100 a year from his rice field.

Ms Nguyen says: “His friend told him that he should go to England, that he could make £2,000 a month, working in a nail salon. We told him not to, that it was all costing so much money, but his friend persuaded him to go.” He called his family every day. Last Tuesday, he told them that he was about to leave France for Britain; that was the last they heard from him. The next day his wife, Hoang Thi Thuong, got the phone call.

“It was from her husband’s friend,” Ms Nguyen says. “He was travelling with him to England, but he was still waiting to go in another [later] container. He said that something went wrong and that the people in the container couldn’t breathe.”

His wife is in hospital, having suffered a mental breakdown and dangerously high blood pressure. “How can she survive, how can she carry on without her husband, with two little kids?” Ms Nguyen says. “People here depend on money sent back from Britain. There are no proper jobs so people go there and send money to support their families.”

Bui Thi Nhung, at 19 the youngest of the suspected victims named so far, was another young Vietnamese for whom a nail salon in Britain was the door to a better life. Her father had recently died of heart disease. “That’s why she went,” says her distraught brother, Bui Van Diep.

“My sister was a happy person. She had a dream of going to England and making money to send back home.”

A few hours before the bodies were found in the container, she phoned to say that she was crossing to Britain, and they have heard nothing from her since. Today, her mother sits weeping in front of a smiling photograph of Ms Bui.

“We look to the British government and authorities to confirm what has happened to my son,” Mr Le says.

“My son has two kids. His wife has not eaten for days. He has a debt of 700 million dong and I am responsible for it. Please confirm if my son was in that lorry. Please send him home to be buried.”