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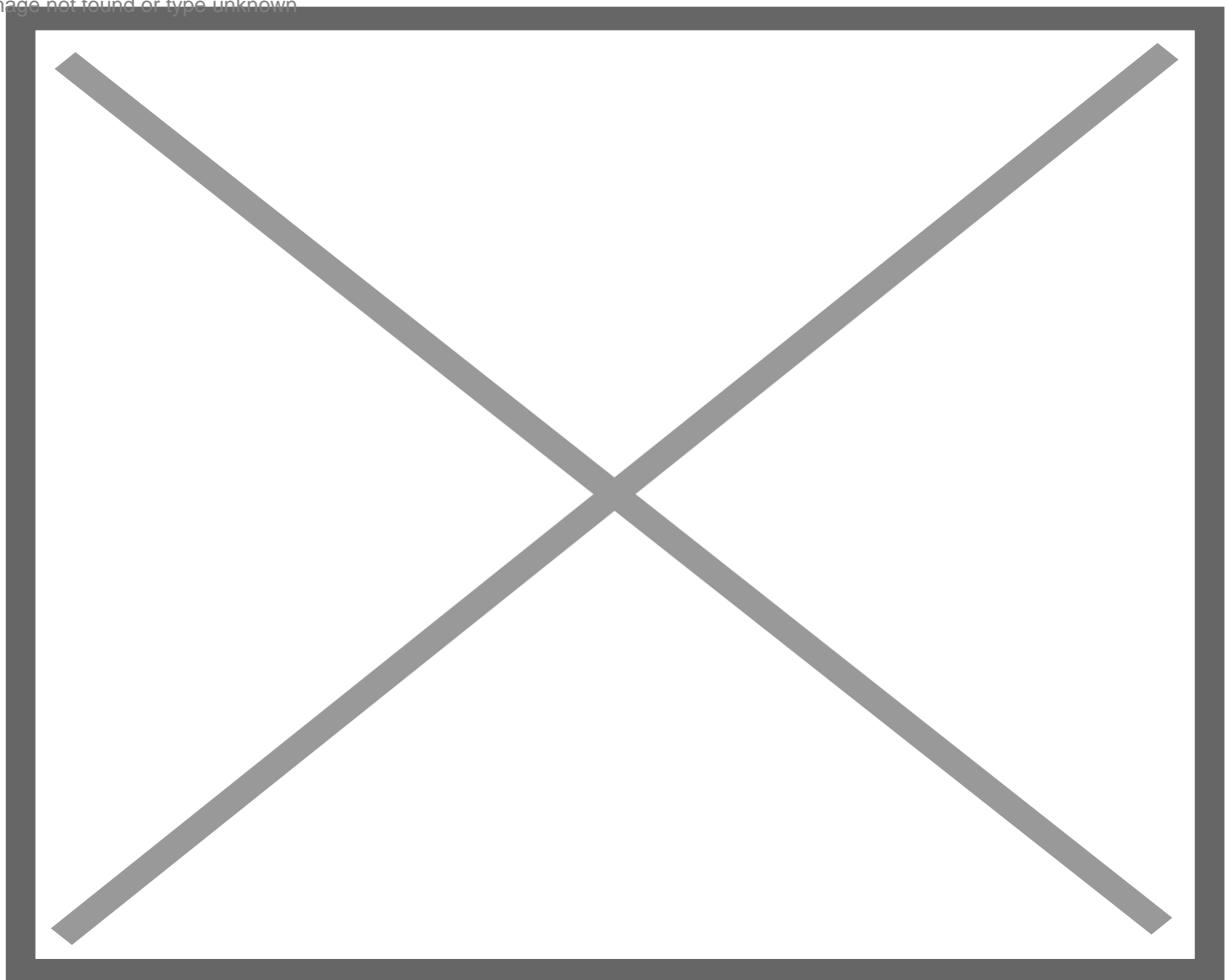
"Romanian Crime Families" Among Undocumented Immigrants Pouring Into USVI, Police Commissioner Reveals

St. John said to be gateway for undocumented migrants as VIPD highlights challenges in managing illegal immigration

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The VIPD believes there could be thousands of undocumented persons currently in the territory and confirmed that St. John is the preferred entry point for people migrating illegally.

In 2023, authorities encountered 627 undocumented individuals on St. John, but Police Commissioner Ray Martinez told senators on Wednesday that he estimates the true numbers are more than double that figure. "More than 60 percent of the individuals that come in here [are] unknown to us," he told lawmakers on the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public

Safety Wednesday.

Mr. Martinez explained that his officers continue to work assiduously on their own or with federal partners, including Homeland Security and Customs and Border Protection agents, to clamp down on illegal immigration in St. John. “We have come into contact with over 150 undocumented persons here on St. John, and today is only the 31st of the month,” Mr. Martinez disclosed during Thursday’s meeting. An ongoing joint operation with federal agencies led to the arrest of a boat operator and two other individuals whom the VIPD had reason to believe were “picking [up] and transporting these undocumented individuals,” the commissioner said.

Apprehensions relating to illegal migration are [not new or isolated events](#), and while recent law enforcement efforts were commended by legislators, they seem to have done little to discourage citizens of other countries from making the dangerous journey by sea to St. John.

Residents of the island remain vigilant. Dr. Monica Miller-Smith, executive director of the Coral Bay Community Council, told lawmakers that undocumented migrants continue to pose a “community concern.” She recounted instances where residents witnessed French-speaking migrants being picked up outside of their places of work, and wet clothes being discarded along hiking trails. Several residents “just don’t feel safe using the trail” after those discoveries, reported Dr. Smith.

VIPD wants to do more to combat illegal migration but is restricted by a current lack of resources particularly “on the marine side,” admitted Mr. Martinez. A specialized vessel earmarked for the St. Thomas/St. John district is currently being built, he disclosed. He remained hopeful, promising that “once our go-fast is here, [along] with the resources that we have, we are going to be able to make a great impact.”

Senator Marise James described the issue as a “burden” on the local community. She argued that because of the volume of people coming in, St. John “needs more attention than any of the other islands” as it relates to illegal migration. According to police estimates, over 2,000 undocumented individuals landed on St. John in 2023. Countries of origin for those who the VIPD has encountered range from regional neighbors – Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Eastern Caribbean islands, Cuba – to South and Central America, and even further afield – Cameroon, Ukraine, and individuals from “Romanian crime families.”

Where undocumented migrants are from often determines what course of action is taken, noted the commissioner. He explained to Senator Franklin Johnson that some are documented and “released into the community for various reasons,” which he declined to elaborate upon. Others are required to maintain communication with federal partners to “facilitate their movements to the U.S. mainland,” while some “are allowed to stay here and seek asylum .. or their paperwork.”

The VIPD said it continues to work toward identifying and apprehending undocumented migrants where necessary. In years past, such persons have been arrested for illegal activity including [fraud](#) and [unlawful possession of firearms](#).