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CBP Agents Intercept Human Smuggling From Tortola to St. John

Customs and Border Protection agents stop a boat without lights, arresting the captain and detaining five passengers

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Illegal immigrants entering the U.S. (not the St. John matter involving Lorenzo Charles)

One man is before the Virgin Islands District Court After Customs and Border Protection officials interrupted an attempt at smuggling people across the border from Tortola to St. John.

CBP Marine Interdiction Agents were patrolling the coastline near Leinster Bay in St. John on the evening of February 23, when they spotted a boat near the shoreline of Tortola. According to court documents, using their night vision goggles, the agents say they followed the vessel's journey from Tortola, across international waters, and into Leinster Bay near the Annaberg ruins. The

boat, officials say, was operating with no navigational lights on board.

After the boat turned around and began heading back to Tortola, the agents activated their own lights and sirens, commanding the vessel to heave to. The captain, identified as Lorenzo Charles, a citizen of St. Vincent & the Grenadines, was apprehended and the boat towed to St. Thomas.

Apart from Charles, there were five others on board - three Indian nationals including a minor, one Argentinian national, and a national of the Dominican Republic. All six were determined not to be citizens of the United States, and had entered the country illegally.

Charles, for his part, seemingly admitted guilt as soon as he was questioned, telling a Homeland Security Investigations special agent that he knows it was wrong to bring people across in this manner.

However, he explained that he borrowed \$4000 for someone he reportedly did not name. He was later contacted to "clear the bill," according to documents before the court, and understood that to mean that he must perform a service to satisfy his debt. He met the person who had loaned him the money at a location in West End Tortola, and saw the five passengers being helped aboard the vessel. Once everyone was loaded, Charles said he departed from Tortola, driving slowly at first, until he received a call from the unnamed individual saying that he needs his money. Then he continued with the trip in earnest, he told agents.

The boat did not have GPS equipment on board, but Charles told law enforcement that he could clearly see St. John from Tortola. He admitted to knowing the correct way to enter the U.S., and also reportedly confessed to having smuggled people across illegally around three times before this trip. This run, Charles said, was supposed to have cleared the remaining \$1000 balance of his debt to the unnamed individual.

The passengers, when questioned, said they had paid someone other than Charles to be taken from Tortola to St. John.

A detention hearing is set for Tuesday before U.S. Magistrate Ruth Miller. Prosecutors have asked for Charles to be detained ahead of trial, as they argue he presents a flight risk. However, if a suitable third-party custodian can be identified and accepted by the court, the state will not object to pre-trial release.