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156 Pounds of Cocaine Worth \$1.3 Million Seized Near Puerto Rico; Vessel Departed St. Thomas

CBP agents intercept boat during nighttime patrol; suspects throw cocaine bricks overboard in dramatic pursuit before agents disable vessel's engine near Culebra, recovering 59 bricks of cocaine

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ST. THOMAS —Two men are facing federal drug trafficking charges after their vessel was intercepted by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Air and Marine Operations (AMO) agents on October 6. According to court documents, the vessel, a 20-foot center console Spider Yola with a purple hull and one outboard engine, was initially spotted traveling without lights approximately one mile northwest of Savana Island, St. Thomas.

AMO agents tracked the vessel as it navigated westward before attempting to intercept it near the Puerto Rican island of Culebra. Despite the agents' signals to stop, the two men

onboard—identified as Luis Manuel Perez Lopez and Anli Jiminez Rodriguez—failed to comply, leading to a pursuit. The vessel reportedly engaged in evasive maneuvers while the men began tossing bags overboard.

CBP officers managed to recover two of the discarded packages during the pursuit. The men continued to ignore warning shots, prompting AMO agents to fire into the vessel's engine, disabling it and forcing the vessel to stop.

As officers approached the boat, one of the bags that Perez Lopez and Jiminez Rodriguez attempted to discard became snagged on a cleat at the rear of the vessel, spilling its contents into the sea. The spilled items were several bricks of a substance that later field-tested positive for cocaine. In total, 59 bricks, weighing approximately 70.75 kilograms (156 pounds), were recovered. CBP estimates the value of the seized narcotics at \$1.3 million.

According to Perez Lopez's statements, the men had picked up the bags in St. Thomas before setting out to sea. The men, who claimed Dominican Republic citizenship, were taken into custody, and Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) has since assumed control of both the suspects and the contraband for further investigation and prosecution.

The two men were charged with possession with intent to distribute cocaine. As the captain of the vessel, Perez Lopez was additionally charged with failure to heave to. Both appeared before U.S. Magistrate Alan Teague on Tuesday. During the hearing, Magistrate Teague, with consent from the defendant, ordered Jiminez Rodriguez to remain in detention while awaiting trial. The judge had not yet made a determination regarding Perez Lopez's detention status, while prosecutors have requested that both men remain in custody, citing concerns over a heightened flight risk and other factors. A detention hearing is scheduled for Wednesday.

Christopher Hunter, Director of Air and Marine Operations in the Caribbean, stated, "Our interdiction efforts show results in all coastal areas of the island as a testimony of our commitment to protect our borders from dangerous contraband." He added that AMO's actions reflect the agency's ongoing mission to safeguard the nation by addressing security threats through aviation and maritime law enforcement expertise.

In addition to the October 6 incident, AMO interdicted a vessel on October 2 attempting to smuggle 599.1 kilograms (1,321 pounds) of cocaine along the western coast of Puerto Rico, further showcasing the agency's commitment to border security.

AMO operates with approximately 1,800 federal agents and mission support personnel, alongside 240 aircraft and 300 marine vessels throughout the United States, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Its mission extends beyond the borders, ensuring security through its advanced capabilities and partnerships in air and maritime environments.