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Federal Authorities Arrest Seven, Including Previously Deported Individual, in High-Speed Boat Chase and Illegal Entry Incidents on St. Thomas and St. John

U.S. Coast Guard and Customs agents intercept seven undocumented Venezuelan and Dominican nationals; vessel captain Anibal Vega Arizmendi charged with human smuggling, while Martin Ortega Adames faces re-entry charges after previous 2006 deportation.

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ST. THOMAS — In two separate incidents, federal law enforcement authorities have detained at least seven people accused of illegally entering the United States.

Cruz Miguel Zabala was one of three people spotted by the US Coast Guard hiding in the bushes on the Annaberg beach on April 25. Coast Guard officials informed Customs and Border

Protection Air Marine Operations agents, who went to investigate.

CBP officers met and questioned the three. One reportedly said they had come to St. John from Tortola two days ago, and had been trying to go back. They were taken to the CBP's detention facility on St. Thomas.

Zabala reportedly agreed to speak to officials without a lawyer present, and according to documents submitted to court, admitted to being a Venezuelan citizen who knowingly entered the territory illegally. He was arrested and charged for illegal entry, as was Feliz Rafael Marquez Sanchez, the second man found on the beach. He also reportedly agreed to speak without an attorney present, reportedly showed his Venezuelan passport and admitted to landing on St. John without presenting himself for inspection.

U.S. Magistrate Emile Henderson III has scheduled a bench trial for Zabala on June 3, 2025, while Sanchez's matter will be handled by Magistrate Alan Teague. Charges for the third individual found on the beach have not yet appeared on the court's public docket.

Days later, on April 28, CBP AMO agents were conducting surveillance on a vessel moored in Krum Bay St. Thomas. The Puerto Rico registered boat left its moorings around 2:00 a.m., moving off without any navigational lights. AMO launched a vessel to intercept the darkened boat, but even after having spotted the tell-tale blue lights of law enforcement, the target vessel failed to stop when ordered. CBP officers eventually had to fire upon the boat to disable it, and the fleeing vessel stopped just east of Sail Rock.

Seven individuals were aboard, six of them nationals of the Dominican Republic, including Jennifer Lisbet Matos. Data for her was found when Homeland Security Agents performed records checks using a provided date of birth and alien number, suggesting that she had already established a file with the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (UCIS). She was found to have entered the United States last June, but according to HSI did not have legal status in the country. She was arrested and charged with illegal entry, and is scheduled for a bench trial before Judge Henderson on June 3.

Martin Ortega Adames was also on the boat with Ms. Matos. He was found to have been previously deported from the United States in 2006, with no evidence of permission to re-enter. He was charged with re-entry of a removed alien, and will have a bond hearing on Wednesday.

Without declaring explicitly that Frias was one of the six aboard Mr. Vega-Arizmendi's boat, an affidavit from a Homeland Security official declares that Mr. Frias is a material witness to the case, who would – because of his illegal entry to the United States – be removed to the Dominican Republic after Mr. Vega-Arizmendi's matter has concluded. Authorities are seeking that he be officially detained to ensure his participation in the matter. A bond hearing is set for Wednesday before U.S. Magistrate Alan Teague. Authorities are also seeking the detention of Garcia Diaz, another national of the Dominican Republic, on the same grounds.

Meanwhile, the captain of the vessel, Anibal Vega Arizmendi, also reportedly agreed to waive his rights and speak to Homeland Security agents. Through an interpreter, the Puerto Rican man reportedly told the agents that he knew that his six passengers did not have the correct documentation to legally be in the United States. The boat was headed to Culebra in Puerto Rico, he said. He was arrested and charged with human smuggling and failing to heave to. Prosecutors are seeking his detention ahead of trial, arguing that he is a convicted felon on supervised release. Mr. Arizmendi had initially been sentenced to 135 months prison in 2019, with 5 years of supervised release for conspiracy to traffic cocaine. That sentence was amended in 2024 to 120

months of incarceration. By January of 2025, court records indicate that he was transferred to the jurisdiction of the District of Puerto Rico to begin his supervised release at the end of March 2025. This arrest comes exactly one month since the start of his time on supervised release. A detention hearing for Mr. Vega-Arizmendi will be held on Wednesday.

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