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Federal Case Alleges USVI Woman Ran Cocaine Network, Handled Cash, and Tried to Import \$341k Go-Fast Boat

Prosecutors say Daniella Saunders James managed cash collections, coordinated communications, and attempted to import a high-speed vessel with conflicting paperwork while the alleged ringleader was jailed.

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Federal prosecutors allege that a U.S. Virgin Islands resident took over key operations of a cocaine trafficking enterprise while its leader was imprisoned abroad, managing money flows, coordinating communications, and attempting to import a high-speed vessel into the territory as part of the organization's activities.

According to filings from the United States Attorney's Office for the District of the Virgin Islands, Daniella Saunders James was arrested last week and charged with possession of a controlled substance with intent to distribute and conspiracy to distribute a controlled substance. Prosecutors laid out their allegations in a motion seeking to keep her detained pending trial.

Investigators say the alleged ringleader, Tarik Aaron, was incarcerated in the British Virgin Islands during the relevant period. While he was imprisoned, prosecutors contend, Saunders James stepped in to manage his Florida operations. Phone records obtained through surveillance and intercepted communications indicate that, at least during 2024 and 2025, she "collected money for [Tarik] Aaron's cocaine trafficking business while Aaron was incarcerated," according to the government.

Prosecutors state that a phone number saved in Aaron's device as "Golden Look" was registered to the name "Daniella James" at Saunders James's address in Brandon. They further allege that other members of the enterprise contacted her when they needed to communicate with Aaron, whom they referred to as "Khamp."

The government says additional messages support its claim that Saunders James coordinated aspects of the operation. Investigators had previously learned that members of Aaron's organization discussed transporting drugs concealed in bleach containers. Prosecutors allege that Saunders James received messages asking whether associates had any "bleach" available and that she sent numerous messages to others soliciting orders for various bleach products. "The United States is unaware of Saunders James operating a laundry or cleaning business," prosecutors told the court.

Text messages from Saunders James's phone are also cited as evidence that she handled cash management for the enterprise. Prosecutors allege she communicated with Aaron about cash shortages and notified others when their cash submissions were short. Information from her WhatsApp application "showed that Aaron was her most frequent contact," the government said.

Prosecutors further allege that Saunders James played a role in laundering money for Aaron. In late 2024, she purchased a go-fast boat in Tennessee for \$341,000 in cash. In an interview with federal investigators, the seller said Saunders James represented herself as a vape shop owner whose husband operated a boat charter company in the U.S. Virgin Islands. On the day of the transaction, she was accompanied by two men she identified as her brothers, who removed a large duffel bag filled with cash in various denominations from their truck. Prosecutors say Saunders James provided the seller with a money counter to assist with counting the funds. The seller issued a handwritten bill of sale and provided the boat's Delaware registration paperwork. In the days that followed, Saunders James allegedly sent the remaining \$8,900 of the purchase price through a mobile payment application.

According to the government, Saunders James then attempted to deliver the vessel from Florida to the U.S. Virgin Islands. Importation paperwork listed Aaron as the purchaser, even though he remained incarcerated in the BVI at the time. The documents reflected a purchase price of \$420,000, nearly \$80,000 more than what prosecutors say was actually paid. U.S. Customs and Border Protection placed a hold on the boat after discovering it was equipped with a night-vision camera. The original seller later told investigators that the equipment had been added after the vessel left his possession.

Prosecutors say Saunders James provided CBP with information that conflicted with earlier submissions in an effort to secure the boat's release. She allegedly produced two bills of sale

reflecting different prices, including one purportedly signed by Aaron despite his incarceration. Investigators say she contacted the original seller to ask whether he would revise the bill of sale to match the higher price shown in documents submitted to U.S. Virgin Islands officials; the seller declined.

The government alleges that Saunders James continued her efforts by returning to CBP with a third purchase agreement, which prosecutors say “appeared to be Microsoft Word system generated” and contained multiple discrepancies. A power of attorney included in the submission misspelled Saunders James’s name and purported to show Aaron signing in the presence of a notary and presenting a Florida driver’s license, despite being imprisoned at the time.

At her detention hearing, prosecutors argued that “the weight of the evidence is overwhelming.” They cited the seriousness of the alleged offenses, the potential penalties—a mandatory minimum of 10 years and a maximum sentence of life in prison—and what they described as a significant flight risk, heightened by Saunders James’s ties to the British Virgin Islands.

Emile A. Henderson III agreed with the government, concluding that the woman prosecutors described as “an integral member” of “a large-scale drug operation spanning from the BVI to Florida” should remain detained while the case proceeds toward trial.