

The Virgin Islands Consortium

P.R. And D.R. Men Facing Life In Prison Following Major Federal Drug Bust In St. Thomas

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ST. THOMAS -- After a four-day trial, a federal jury found Alexandro Gerandino Aracena, 39, of the Dominican Republic, and Ricardo Cardona, 35, of Puerto Rico, guilty of conspiracy to possess with intent to distribute cocaine and various firearms possession charges, United States Attorney Ronald W. Sharpe announced Friday.

According to evidence presented at trial, on the morning of September 3, 2015, Mr. Gerandino-Aracena and Mr. Cardona traveled from Fajardo, Puerto Rico, to St. Thomas in a private vessel equipped with a hidden compartment to purchase 150 kilograms of cocaine. Mr. Gerandino Aracena and Mr. Cardona docked their vessel at the Marine Center Dock at the University of the Virgin Islands, where they met other members of the

drug trafficking organization to collect the cocaine in exchange for \$250,000 and three assault rifles. Earlier that day in Puerto Rico, U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (D.E.A.) agents seized \$1.4 million dollars in cash, which was partial payment for the cocaine. Mr. Gerandino-Aracena and Mr. Cardona each face a minimum of 10 years in prison and a maximum of life imprisonment, and a maximum fine of \$10,000,000.

On the fourth day of trial, co-defendant Marco Asala Belgar, 35, of the Dominican Republic, pleaded guilty to misprision of a felony and faces a maximum of three years' imprisonment and a maximum fine of \$250,000. Co-defendant Pedro Beltre Guzman, 36, of the Dominican Republic, also pleaded guilty during the trial to possession of firearms by an illegal alien and faces a maximum of 10 years' imprisonment and a maximum fine of \$250,000.

On March 29, 2016, co-defendant Jose Luis Ponce-Pagan, 36, of Puerto Rico, pleaded guilty to conspiracy to possess with the intent to distribute 100 kilograms of cocaine and faces a mandatory minimum sentence of 10 years in prison and a maximum sentence of life in prison, and a \$10,000,000 fine. All defendants remain in custody pending sentencing, which is scheduled for August 24, 2016.

This case is the result of a joint investigation by the D.E.A., Federal Bureau of Investigation, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives and U.S. Customs and Border Protection. It was prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorneys Sigrid M. Tejo-Sprotte and Delia L. Smith.

Feature Image: Forensic personnel prepare about 400kg of cocaine to be burnt in Tegucigalpa, Honduras on May 11, 2012.

Image Credit: SCPR.org.