The Virgin Islands Consortium

Local and Federal Law Enforcement in USVI Receive National Award For Drug-Busting Operations

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United States Attorney Gretchen C.F. Shappert announced Monday that federal and local Virgin Islands law enforcement officers, together with members of the Virgin Islands U.S. Attorney's Office, have been selected as the recipients of a national award for an outstanding Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force (OCDETF) investigation, Operation PY Beto Kilo.

"This National OCDETF Award is an acknowledgement of the tremendous work of law enforcement and the U.S. Attorney's Office to dismantle and disrupt transnational drug organizations. Together, we are apprehending the major drug dealers, the money-launderers, and the gun smugglers who threaten our way of life in the territory. This success is just the start. Law enforcement is on the march. We will continue to arrest and prosecute narco-traffickers and seize their ill-gotten gains," Shappert said.

Law enforcement agency award recipients include: the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), U.S. Marshals Service (USMS), Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), U.S. Coast Guard (USGC), Transportation Security Administration (TSA), Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosive (ATF), U.S. Air Force (USAF), Virgin Islands National Guard (VING), Virgin Islands Police Department (VIPD), and the Virgin Islands U.S. Attorney's Office (VI-USAO).

According to the release, the Py Beto Kilo investigation focused on a sophisticated and structured drug trafficking organization that transported cocaine from Columbia through Venezuela on fishing vessels across the Caribbean Sea to an area 60 to 80 miles south of St. Croix. The drug trafficking organization, led by Jose Hodge in St. Croix, Omy Gutierrez-Calderon in Puerto Rico, and Sergio Quinones- Davila in Florida, operated with a high level of sophistication utilizing Venezuelan fishing fleets with established transportation routes to conduct mid-sea transfer. The organization sent decoy vessels ahead of the cocaine vessels.

The cocaine vessels were equipped with a mechanism to sink the cocaine if a vessel were detected by law enforcement. Members of the organization communicated at sea using satellite telephones, Blackberries and Pin to Pin messaging, the U.S Attorney's Office said. This mode of operation allowed the organization to engage in large-scale drug trafficking undetected for a number of years. Transporters from St. Croix and Puerto Rico, traveled in go-fast boats and met vessels at pre-determined GPS coordinates to conduct mid-sea transfers of cocaine. Members of the organization then transported the drugs to St. Croix and later transshipped them to Puerto Rico. A small quantity of drugs were distributed on St. Croix.

The investigation, led by Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) on St. Croix, with assistance from other law enforcement agencies, identified 17 members of the organization: two in South America, three in St. Croix, ten in Puerto Rico, and two in Florida. The investigation also revealed that the organization smuggled approximately 50 to 100 kilograms of cocaine per shipment every few months, according to the release. The cocaine sold for about $14,000 per kilogram on St. Croix, and $24,000 per kilogram on Puerto Rico. During the course of the investigation, approximately $1,500,000.00, 300 kilograms of cocaine and several firearms were seized from this organization.

In 2016, the United States Attorney's Office secured an indictment charging fifteen members of the organization with drug trafficking offenses. Six members were convicted on guilty pleas, charges were dismissed against two defendants, and the remaining six members went to a trial in the spring of 2017. The original trial lasted eight weeks and ended in a hung jury due to suspected jury tampering. All six remaining defendants were convicted after a second trial in the spring and summer of 2018 that also lasted eight weeks.

Shappert noted that the OCDETF Program was established in 1982 to mount a comprehensive attack and reduce the supply of illegal drugs in the United States and to diminish the violence and other criminal activity associated with the drug trade. It is the centerpiece of the United States Attorney General's strategy to reduce the availability of illicit narcotics.

“OCDETF operates nationwide and combines the resources and the expertise of federal agencies, working in conjunction with their local partners, to target drug trafficking, gun smuggling, and money laundering organizations,” she said. “OCDETF agents, task force officers, and prosecutors handle complex investigations and prosecutions of the highest-level drug traffickers, money launderers, and other priority transnational criminal organizations that threaten the United States. OCDETF facilitates joint operations by focusing its partner agencies on priority targets, by managing and coordinating multi-agency efforts, and by leveraging intelligence information derived from numerous sources.”

The OCDETF awards recognize outstanding investigations from each of the OCDETF partner agencies.

The OCDETF program provides federal resources to federal and other partner law enforcement agencies to mitigate financial obstacles hindering criminal investigations. These criminal investigations are conducted by multi-agencies in a collaborated effort, according to the release. OCDETF’s provide assets needed to conduct thousands of criminal investigations, which traverse the United States, the territories, and in some instances span to criminal organizations operating in foreign countries.

In OCDETF’s coordinated attack against drug trafficking and money laundering organizations, OCDETF formulated the Consolidated Priority Organization Target (CPOT) list. The CPOT list is a multi-agency target list of “command and control” elements of the most prolific international drug trafficking and money laundering organizations. Through the combined efforts of law enforcement agencies operating under the OCDETF umbrella, CPOTs are targeted with the goal of disrupting or dismantling their operations, said the U.S. Attorney's Office.

OCDETF’s mission is straightforward: to arrest drug traffickers, dismantle and disrupt drug trafficking and money laundering organizations, reduce the illegal drug supply, seize assets, and bring criminals to the United States justice system or other competent jurisdictions.