

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Suspected South American Narcotic Smugglers Apprehended Off Coast Of Ecuador Charged With Trafficking 1,535 Kilograms Of Cocaine

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ST. THOMAS -- Freddy Montano Paz, 29, Calixto Tumbaco, 41, Mariano Abregon, 42, and Hector Hernandez Saucedo, 48, appeared Wednesday before U.S. Magistrate Judge Ruth Miller for arraignment and detention hearings on charges of conspiracy to possess and possession of a controlled substance on board a vessel subject to the jurisdiction of the United States, United States Attorney Gretchen C.F. Shappert announced. At the conclusion of the hearings, Magistrate Miller ordered all four defendant detained pending trial.

The information alleges that Montano Paz, Tumbaco, Abregon and Hernandez Saucedo were all on board a semi-submersible vessel that was intercepted by the United States Coast Guard *Hamilton* (USCG) cutter while on routine patrol. The USCG crew first sighted the semi-submersible vessel on May 10, 2019, approximately 250 nautical miles northwest of Esmeraldas, Ecuador. The vessel did not display any indicia indicating its nationality.

After being detected, the four occupants— two Colombian nationals, one Ecuadorian national, and one Mexican national-- began tossing the bales of suspected narcotics overboard their vessel. The USCG disabled the semi-submersible vessel, and successfully seized 40 bales of suspected narcotics, including bales that were tossed overboard. The 40 recovered bales contained approximately 1,535 kilograms of a white powdery substance that field tested positive for cocaine.

This case is being investigated by the USCG and the Drug Enforcement Agency, and is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Delia L. Smith.

United States Attorney Shappert reminded the public that an information is merely a formal charging document and is not evidence of guilt. Every defendant is presumed innocent until and unless found guilty.