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First of 11 Defendants in 2019 Cocaine Bust at Sea Off St. Croix Pleads Guilty

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USCG Cutter Donald Horsley

ST. CROIX — United States Attorney Gretchen C.F. Shappert has announced that 33-year old Venezuelan national Johan Garcia Suarez, one of eleven Venezuelan nationals apprehended at sea off of St. Croix, pleaded guilty Wednesday to conspiring to possess with intent to distribute over 5 kilograms of cocaine while on board a vessel subject to the jurisdiction of the United States.

According to court documents, on the evening of September 25, 2019, the United States Coast Guard (USCG) Cutter Donald Horsley intercepted a suspicious 55-foot vessel named La Gran Tormenta displaying Venezuelan nationality indicia approximately 38 nautical miles south of St. Croix. Occupants of the vessel did not reply to USCG efforts to engage in questioning of the crew,

and upon detection, the La Gran Tormenta changed course and jettisoned packages.

USCG Cutter Donald Horsley crew members subsequently retrieved two bales from the water. The two jettisoned bales contained packages with brick shaped objects, which were subsequently laboratory tested and found to contain approximately 49 kilograms of cocaine hydrochloride (powder cocaine).

After requesting and receiving permission from the flag state (Venezuela) to stop the vessel, USCG personnel attempted a right of visit boarding, which was ineffective because crew on the La Gran Tormenta disregarded Coast Guard personnel's instructions.

Eventually USCG personnel obtained control of the La grand Tormenta through use of an "entanglement tactic", which stopped the vessel's engine. A USCG counter-drug boarding team encountered 11 persons, including Suarez.

Suarez's sentencing date has yet to be scheduled. A federal district court judge will determine any sentence after considering the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors.

The other ten defendants are scheduled for trial on July 18, 2022 in federal court. They face a mandatory minimum of 10 years in prison and maximum of life if convicted.

The case was investigated by the U.S. Coast Guard, Customs and Border Protection, and the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (D.E.A.). It is being prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorney Melissa P. Ortiz. This effort is part of an Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces (OCDETF) operation.