

Two Venezuelans Plead Guilty to Cocaine Possession While in U.S. Jurisdiction - 38 Nautical Miles South of St. Croix

Crime / **Published On June 17, 2022 05:31 AM /**

Staff Consortium **June 17, 2022**

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United States Coast Guard Cutter Donald Horsley.

ST. CROIX — U.S. Attorney for the V.I. Delia L. Smith announced Wednesday that Henry Gonzalez Noriega, 47, and Francisco Rodriguez Infante, 28, both of Venezuela, pleaded guilty before District Court Magistrate Judge Emile A. Henderson, III to conspiracy 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 La Gran Tormenta failed to respond to USCG's efforts to engage in questioning of the crew, and upon detection, the La Gran Tormenta changed course and began jettisoning packages. Crew members from the USCG Cutter Donald Horsley 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.

After requesting and receiving permission to stop the vessel from Venezuela, the flag state, USCG personnel attempted a right-of-visit boarding which was ineffective because crew on the La Gran Tormenta disregarded the USCG's instructions. Eventually, USCG personnel obtained control of the La Gran Tormenta through use of an entanglement tactic which stopped the vessel's engine. A USCG counter-drug boarding team later encountered 11 persons, including the defendants.

The sentencing date for Noriega and Infante is scheduled for October 14, 2022. For their convictions, they face a mandatory minimum sentence of 10 years in prison. A federal district court judge will determine any sentence after considering the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors.

The case was investigated by the U.S. Coast Guard, Customs and Border Protection, and the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. 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. OCDETF identifies, disrupts, and dismantles the highest-level criminal organizations that threaten the United States using a prosecutor-led, intelligence-driven, multi-agency approach. Additional information about the OCDETF Program can be found at <https://www.justice.gov/OCDETF>.