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Man From DR Sentenced to More Than 8 Years in Prison in Connection With Haulover Bay Shootout With CBP Agents

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ST. THOMAS — United States Attorney Delia L. Smith announced today that Joan Morales Nolasco, 37, of the Dominican Republic was sentenced to 101 months of imprisonment — over eight years — by Chief Judge Robert A. Molloy. In March 2022, Nolasco pleaded guilty to cocaine conspiracy and possession of firearms in furtherance of a drug conspiracy.

According to court documents and evidence presented at co-defendant Samuel Pena Columna's trial, on September 25, 2019, Nolasco was involved in a shootout with

several U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Air and Marine Interdiction agents. On the evening of September 25, 2019, Nolasco and three co-conspirators were driven by Pena Columna to Haulover Bay, a well-known drug smuggling area on the east end of St. John, with over \$1.1 million to conduct a 100 kilograms cocaine transaction with traffickers from Tortola, BVI.

After arriving at the trail in Haulover Bay, Nolasco and co-defendant Rammer Guerrero-Morales headed down the trail. Nolasco was armed with the long gun and Guerrero-Morales was armed with a handgun. After confirming that the trail was clear, Nolasco and Guerrero-Morales had planned to signal for the other co-conspirators waiting in Pena Columna's vehicle to bring the \$1.1 in cash down the trail to complete the drug transaction while Pena Columna waited at the top of the trail in his vehicle.

Trial evidence further revealed that, on their way down to the trail, Nolasco and Guerrero Morales encountered two CBP agents who immediately announced themselves as police. The agents were fired upon by Guerrero-Morales and a shootout ensued leaving one agent with gunshot wounds to his shoulder and leg. The agents returned fire hitting Guerrero-Morales in his leg which was later amputated due to the severity of his injury.

During the shootout, Nolasco fled the scene and ultimately made his way to the Dominican Republic. He was later extradited back to the Territory for prosecution. Pena Columna and the two remaining co-conspirators also fled the scene. Pena Columna, a paid confidential source conducting his own drug trafficking organization, later told federal agents that he took the two men, along with the \$1.1 million dollars, near the Cruz Bay area where they escaped.

Guerrero-Morales pleaded guilty in March 2022 and is scheduled for sentencing on December 21, 2022. Pena Columna was convicted by a federal jury in September 2022, and his sentencing is scheduled for January 19, 2023.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation, Drug Enforcement Administration, Homeland Security Investigations, U.S. Customs and Border Protection Air and Marine Operations, Department of Homeland Security Office of Inspector General, and the Virgin Islands Police Department investigated this case, and Assistant United States Attorneys Meredith Edwards and Kyle Payne prosecuted the case.

This effort was 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, multiagency approach. Additional information about the OCDETF Program can be found at <https://www.justice.gov/OCDETF>.