The Virgin Islands Consortium

BVI Man Pleads Guilty to Cocaine Conspiracy After Being Caught on Boat With 567 Kilograms of Cocaine Hydrochloride

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ST. CROIX — United States Attorney Delia L. Smith announced Wednesday that Shannon John, 37, of Tortola, British Virgin Islands, pleaded guilty before Magistrate Judge Emile A. Henderson, III to conspiracy to possess with intent to distribute cocaine while onboard a vessel subject to the jurisdiction of the United States.

According to court documents, on January 9, 2022, Customs and Border Protection Air and Marine agents detected a vessel with bales of suspected cocaine in plain view on the deck of the vessel. The vessel was traveling on the northeast side of St. Croix heading north towards the British Virgin Islands. Upon further investigation, agents encountered a 32-foot Manta low-profile vessel with twin 300 HP outboard engines located at approximately 19 nautical miles northeast of St. Croix in international waters in an area known by law enforcement for drug trafficking.

The vessel was dead in the water and displayed no indicia of nationality, flag nor registration, and was determined to be a vessel without nationality, thus subject to the jurisdiction of the United States. Onboard the vessel, agents discovered four occupants later identified as Shannon John, Sean John, Emmanuel Tolentino-Lebron and Augusto Rodriguez-Molina, along with 21 bales wrapped in plastic and encased in rope.

Drug Enforcement Administration laboratory analysis later confirmed that the bales recovered from the vessel contained approximately 567 kilograms of cocaine hydrochloride. Defendants Sean John and Tolentino-Lebron pleaded guilty on December 7, 2022, to the conspiracy charge. At sentencing, the defendants face a mandatory minimum sentence of 10 years in prison. A federal District Court judge will determine their sentence after considering the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and other factors.

This case was investigated by the United States Coast Guard, Homeland Security Investigation, Customs and Border Protection and Drug Enforcement Administration and is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Melissa P. Ortiz.

This prosecution is part of an Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces (OCDETF) investigation. OCDETF identifies, disrupts, and dismantles the highest-level drug traffickers, money launderers, gangs, and transnational criminal organizations that threaten the United States by using a prosecutor-led, intelligence-driven, multi-agency approach that leverages the strengths of federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies against criminal networks.