

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Man Facing 20 Years After Coast Guard Interdicts Vessel With Over 550 Kilos of Cocaine

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ST. CROIX — United States Attorney for the V.I. Delia L. Smith announced Thursday that Michael Antony Nelson-Gaet, 34, of Nicaragua, pleaded guilty before Magistrate Judge Emile A. Henderson, III, to conspiracy to possess with intent to distribute cocaine while on board a vessel subject to the jurisdiction of the United States.

Sentencing for Nelson-Gaet is set for June 21, 2023, where he faces a maximum of 20 years in prison. A federal district judge will determine any sentence after considering the U.S. sentencing guidelines and other statutory factors, the District Court said.

According to court documents, on March 5, 2022, during a routine patrol in international waters, the United States Coast Guard Cutter Legare encountered the “La Bendecida Leo, a go-fast vessel located 140 nautical miles southwest of Isla de Malpelo, Columbia. The go-fast vessel was traveling at a high rate of speed with bales and fuel barrels visible on its deck. The vessel had no registration, but the occupants claimed Nicaraguan nationality for the vessel. Nicaragua could neither confirm nor deny nationality of the vessel.

The vessel was therefore subject to the jurisdiction of the United States. The Coast Guard boarding team took action after members observed the occupants throwing the bales overboard. Approximately 550.6 kilograms of cocaine and 136 pounds of marijuana were recovered from the ocean.

The United States Coast Guard, Homeland Security Investigations and Drug Enforcement Administration are investigating this case, and Assistant United States Attorney Daniel H. Huston is prosecuting the case, according to the District Court. 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, multiagency approach. Additional information about the OCDETF Program can be found at <https://www.justice.gov/OCDETF>.