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3 Dead, 13 Missing After Migrant Boat Headed to USVI Capsizes Off St. Kitts Coast; Antiguan Officials Say Rogue Charter Brought in Hundreds of Cameroonians Fleeing War

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How did approximately 30 African migrants end up on a boat that capsized and sank off the St. Kitts & Nevis coast? The tragedy that unfolded in Caribbean waters earlier this week is just the latest chapter in the odd journey of hundreds of people from various African countries to Antigua & Barbuda.

At least 13 people are still unaccounted for after the Jenna B capsized 12 nautical miles south of Conaree Village on the east coast of St. Kitts at around 3 am Tuesday morning. The Royal St. Christopher and Nevis Police Force, assisted by cargo boats and cruise ships in the area, mounted

a search and were able to rescue 16 people out of the water, two Antiguan nationals and 14 Cameroonians. Three of the 32 on board the boat were dead. Their identities, Kittitian officials say, have thus far not been determined.

Lt. Colonel Anthony Comrie, Commander of the St Kitts Nevis Defense Force, said the now-sunken vessel left the French island of Guadeloupe about a week ago and was moored in Antigua for some time. He said the vessel left Antigua on Monday evening and was reported missing the following morning. Reports in several press outlets indicate that the boat may have been attempting to reach the U.S. Virgin Islands. Subsequently, the St. Kitts police came to learn that the missing vessel from Antigua was the same one that capsized off its coast.

Gaston Brown, Antigua & Barbuda's Prime Minister, acknowledged that most of those who boarded the Jenna B on Monday may be nationals of African countries, part of hundreds who ostensibly arrived as tourists but harbored intentions of onward migration to other countries.

"Two things appear clear from today's tragic events. The first is that the Africans on board the vessel wanted to leave Antigua & Barbuda for another country. The second is that the owners and operators of a vessel in Antigua & Barbuda facilitated their transport on an illegal journey," he remarked.

Mr. Browne has promised to launch a full investigation into the situation, including the involvement of any citizens and residents.

"In the meantime, my government will also continue to offer refuge in Antigua & Barbuda to the survivors of today's events, and we will make appropriate arrangements for the burial of the deceased. We will also make every effort to contact their relatives to advise them of this heartbreaking tragedy."

Mr. Browne urged those who remained on island to be patient. "We appeal to the Africans, who are in Antigua and Barbuda, not to be tempted into any schemes such as happened today, but to work with the government, through our Immigration authorities, to help find acceptable solutions to their circumstances," the Antiguan Prime Minister said.

Last year, the Antiguan government, with Mr. Browne at the forefront, proudly announced the launch of an ambitious new Citizenship by Investment Program (CIP) project. Antigua Airways was to be a joint venture between the government and Marvelous Mike Press Ltd, a Nigerian printing and publishing firm, with the Antiguan government holding a 20 percent stake in the enterprise. Marvelous Mike was to have borne the cost of setting up the operation, which would run under a "wet lease" arrangement, where one company supplies the aircraft and at least one crew member, and assumes responsibility for operations, including performing maintenance, procuring insurance, and other legal responsibilities. Another company, the lessee, covers fees, fuel, taxes, and pays the lessor for the number of flight hours racked up using the lessee's flight number.

Antigua Airways' sole plane was owned by EuroAtlantic Airways, a company based in Lisbon Portugal that specializes in charter flights and leases aircraft, crew, maintenance and insurance services.

Mr. Browne had, at the time the venture was announced, said that based on this arrangement, the Nigerian investor, publishing firm Marvelous Mike, would only be required to provide the financial resources to lease the aircraft and pay staff.

The Antiguan government was to have funded its obligations to the fledgling carrier using proceeds from the 10 citizenship applications that were available to airline investors. Despite public skepticism about the viability of the project given that neither of the partners had any experience in the aviation industry, Mr. Browne maintained his confidence that Antigua Airways would be a success. His intention, he said, was for Antigua & Barbuda to serve as a gateway from Africa to the Caribbean, encouraging travel and tourism between the two regions.

On November 1, 2022 – Independence Day in Antigua & Barbuda – the country welcomed the debut flight of Antigua Airways from Lagos, Nigeria. Between November 2022 and January 2023, over 900 visitors from Africa landed in Antigua.

Then, on January 26, 2023, the government announced through its Cabinet notes that the Eastern Caribbean Civil Aviation Authority (ECCAA) had suspended the Antigua Airways charter flight because it had not fully complied with regulatory requirements. There was no indication by the government what requirements had been violated, and efforts to reach ECCAA have thus far, after several calls and emails from Consortium journalists, been unsuccessful. The 10 investors, from whose CIP applications the government was to have funded its obligations in the airline, had not yet put in any funds before the flights were suspended.

Even after the Antigua Airways flights were suspended, Opeyemi Olorunfemi, managing director of the charter operation said the carrier was still working with the aviation authority to get their certification to operate commercial flights.

Meanwhile, residents had begun to notice that something was amiss. After the inaugural landing, some of the people that had come into the country on subsequent flights had not reserved accommodation prior to their arrival, and were spotted in various locations, still trying to secure lodging days after they had landed.

The government subsequently announced that some of these visitors were in fact Cameroonian migrants seeking to escape war in their country. Of the 900 that had come to Antigua, 637 were still on island, seeking refuge. Those who wished to stay, the Antiguan government said, would be given assistance in settling in the twin island state. The news prompted protests in early February, by citizens concerned about the impact on the country's labor market and the pressures a resettlement program would put on the public purse.

Adding another wrinkle to the situation is that the migrants may not have come via Antigua Airways but were flown in on a different charter altogether, one that was “not previously approved by the government,” according to Cabinet spokesperson Melford Nicholas.

“There would have been another charter, a flight in-between that period of time that would have raised the eyebrow of the security checks in respect of the transmigratory pattern that they would have seen from those persons on that other charter flight,” he explained during an interview with an Antiguan radio station.

“Clearly, there was some abuse by the other operator, intentional abuse, and so, we have closed the window of opportunity for that to happen again,” he added.

Prior to the Jenna B tragedy this week, there have been prior instances of African migrants leaving Antigua & Barbuda in search of safe accommodation elsewhere. In November 2022, five Cameroon nationals made their way from Antigua to Trinidad & Tobago where they were declared refugees by the United Nations Commission for Human Rights (UNCHR). They are now reportedly awaiting relocation by the agency to a suitable country.

