

The Virgin Islands Consortium

U.S. Authorities in Virgin Islands Secure Guilty Plea in High Seas Cocaine Trafficking Case

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ST. THOMAS — U.S. Attorney Delia L. Smith on Thursday announced that Leandro De Los Santos, a 33-year-old Dominican Republic national, has pleaded guilty to conspiracy to possess with intent to distribute cocaine while aboard a vessel under U.S. jurisdiction.

De Los Santos is scheduled to be sentenced on August 4, 2023, and faces up to 20 years in prison. The U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors will be considered by a federal district judge when determining the sentence.

According to the U.S. Attorney's Office, on September 11, 2022, a maritime patrol aircraft detected a go-fast vessel navigating approximately 80 nautical miles south of Bani,

Dominican Republic, during a routine patrol. The U.S.S. Billings was dispatched to the area, and crew members noted that the vessel had no flag, registration numbers, or name on its hull. The Dominican Republic Navy later confirmed that the vessel was not registered with their country.

As a result, the vessel was deemed stateless and subject to U.S. laws. The U.S.S. Billings boarding team detained De Los Santos and another individual onboard and discovered 18 bales of cocaine weighing approximately 630 kilograms.

The United States Coast Guard, Homeland Security Investigations, and Drug Enforcement Administration are investigating this case, with Assistant United States Attorney Evan Rikhye prosecuting. The prosecution is part of an Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces (OCDETF) investigation, which aims to identify, disrupt, and dismantle high-level drug traffickers, money launderers, gangs, and transnational criminal organizations that pose a threat to the United States.

The OCDETF employs a prosecutor-led, intelligence-driven, multi-agency approach, leveraging the strengths of federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies to combat criminal networks.