

## Three Ecuadorians Charged in USVI Following Major Cocaine Bust at Sea

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ST. CROIX — U.S. Attorney for the V.I. Delia L. Smith has announced that Luis Menocal-Mero, 38, Carlos Anchundia-Mero, 22, and Carlos Baque-Pincay, 21, have been charged with conspiracy to possess with intent to distribute cocaine while onboard a vessel subject to the jurisdiction of the United States.

On March 8, 2023, during a routine patrol in international waters in the Eastern Pacific, the United States Coast Guard Cutter Farragut intercepted a go-fast vessel approximately 110 nautical miles southeast of the Galapagos Islands, Ecuador. The vessel displayed no indicia of nationality and flew no flag. Upon inspection, Coast Guard officers discovered 30 bales containing approximately 800 kilograms of individually wrapped, brick-shaped packages of cocaine on the vessel's deck and fish hold areas.

One of the occupants claimed Ecuadorian nationality; however, Ecuador could neither confirm nor deny the vessel's nationality. Consequently, the vessel was deemed to be one without nationality and thus subject to the jurisdiction of the United States.

If convicted, the defendants face a mandatory minimum sentence of 10 years and a maximum of life imprisonment. A federal district court judge will determine any sentence after considering the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors.

The United States Coast Guard and Drug Enforcement Administration are investigating the case, which is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Melissa P. Ortiz as part of an Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces (OCDETF) investigation. The OCDETF identifies, disrupts, and dismantles high-level drug traffickers, money launderers, gangs, and transnational criminal organizations that threaten the United States through a prosecutor-led, intelligence-driven, multi-agency approach.

United States Attorney Delia L. Smith reminds the public that an indictment is merely an allegation, and all defendants are presumed innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law.