



Department of Justice

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FIRST DEFENDANTS SENTENCED UNDER NEW SEMI-SUBMERSIBLE STATUTE RECEIVE NINE YEARS

Tampa, Florida - U.S. Attorney A. Brian Albritton announces that U.S. District Judge Richard A. Lazzara today sentenced Victor Rodriguez-Renegifo (age 24), Carlos Andres Mina Meneses (age 25), Jhon Jairo Valencia Saac (age 34) and Miguel Otero Estupinan (age 44) to nine years in federal prison for violating Title 18, United States Code, Section 2285 of the Drug Trafficking Vessel Interdiction Act of 2008. The statute was signed into law in October 2008 in response to the sharp increase in South American narcotics trafficker's deployment of semi-submersible vessels to smuggle cocaine. This was the first case utilizing the new statute to proceed to sentencing.

According to court documents, the United States Coast Guard attempted to approach a semi-submersible vessel on January 7, 2009 approximately 66 miles southeast of the Galapagos Islands in the Eastern Pacific ocean. As the Coast Guard approached the crew abandoned the vessel wearing life vests and inflating a life raft. The semi-submersible sunk within a matter of minutes once the crew left.

The defendants pleaded guilty on May 6, 2009, after U.S. District Judge Lazzara denied defendants' motions challenging the Constitutionality of the statute.

Since December 31, 2008, seven semi-submersible cases have been prosecuted

under the statute. Several other cases are set for sentencing in Federal Court in Tampa, Florida later this month.

United States Attorney A. Brian Albritton commented, "Semi-submersible vessels represent the next generation of maritime smuggling conveyance. It is imperative that the United States' counter-drug effort repel this new tactic by cocaine traffickers to import drugs to the United States. We applaud the United States Coast Guard for their valuable assistance in getting this legislation passed, advocating for strong sentencing guidelines, and putting this statute to use so quickly and with such great success."

This case was investigated by OCDETF's Panama Express Strike Force, comprised of agents and analysts from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), United States Coast Guard Investigative Service (CGIS) and the Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATFS). It was prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Joseph K. Ruddy.