Coast Guard, DHS Partners Interdict Multiple Suspected Smuggling Vessels



The U.S. Coast Guard and Department of Homeland Security partner agencies interdict a suspected maritime smuggling vessel during coordinated operations south of San Clemente Island, California, Feb. 21, 2026. In total, crews interdicted five vessels and apprehended 62 aliens in under 90 minutes. (U.S. Coast Guard courtesy photo)

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SAN DIEGO – The U.S. Coast Guard and Department of Homeland Security partner agencies, supported by the U.S. Navy, interdicted five suspected maritime smuggling vessels and apprehended 62 aliens during coordinated operations south of San Clemente Island, Saturday.

At approximately 12:30 p.m., watchstanders at the Sector San Diego Joint Harbor Operations Center received reports from a partner agency aircraft of three vessels suspected of smuggling illegal aliens, transiting northbound from Mexican waters. The vessels were described as 20-to-25-foot cuddy cabin-style boats carrying fishing gear and fuel barrels onboard.

The Coast Guard Cutter Haddock (WPB-87347) already on patrol in the area, launched a small boat crew to investigate the first vessel and conduct a boarding. Located approximately 26 miles south of San Clemente Island, the vessel was observed flying a U.S. flag and was compliant during the boarding. Haddock crews reported 10 aliens aboard the vessel, all claiming Mexican nationality.

A Department of Homeland Security partner agency aircraft located a second vessel of interest and directed a law enforcement crew to the vessel's location, ultimately leading to a pursuit. Failing to comply with law enforcement commands to stop, warning shots were employed to compel the vessel's compliance. The vessel complied, and 10 additional aliens were identified onboard, all claiming Mexican nationality. All 10 individuals were subsequently embarked aboard the Haddock.

A Department of Homeland Security partner agency vessel then stopped a third vessel suspected of smuggling illegal aliens. Nine additional aliens, all claiming Mexican nationality, were identified and safely embarked aboard the Haddock.

Additional reports of suspected smuggling vessels in the area prompted further response. A U.S. Navy helicopter and small boat crew from the littoral combat ship USS Augusta (LCS-34) with an embarked Coast Guard Maritime Law Enforcement Team (MLET) assisted in locating and interdicting a fourth cuddy cabin vessel. The Coast Guard MLET identified 16 aliens aboard the vessel, 14 claiming Mexican nationality and two claiming Colombian nationality. All 16 individuals were detained and transferred to the Sentinel-class **F**orrest Rednour (WPC-1129).

A fifth vessel was later intercepted by a Department of Homeland Security partner agency vessel, which employed warning shots to gain compliance after the vessel failed to obey law enforcement commands to stop. Seventeen aliens were aboard the vessel,16 claiming Mexican nationality and one claiming Guatemalan nationality. All were taken into custody.

In total, crews interdicted five vessels and apprehended 62 aliens in under 90 minutes. The Haddock and Rednour crews transported all aliens to Coast Guard Sector San Diego, where they were transferred to another Department of Homeland Security agency for further processing. One unaccompanied minor was identified among the group.

Department of Homeland Security partner agency personnel seized four of the five vessels. The fifth vessel, which was taking on water and determined to be unseaworthy, was left at sea.

The Coast Guard routinely conducts patrols alongside

interagency and Department of War partners to detect suspected maritime smuggling operations and interdict illegal activity, while ensuring the safety of life at sea. This case is an example of the stellar partnerships and complex coordination required amongst all agencies involved.