

Coast Guard Offloads \$7.4 Million in Seized Cocaine, Transfers Custody of 9 Smugglers to DEA in San Juan, Puerto Rico



From U.S. Coast Guard 7th District, June 7, 2024

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico – The crew of Coast Guard Cutter Charles David Jr. offloaded and transferred custody of 245 kilograms of cocaine and nine suspected smugglers to Drug Enforcement Administration authorities at Coast Guard Base San Juan, Puerto Rico, Friday.

The seized contraband is estimated to have a wholesale value of \$7.4 million dollars, while the interdiction and seizure is the result of multi-agency efforts involving Coast Guard's Western Hemisphere Strategy, the Caribbean Corridor Strike Force Initiative and Operation Unified Resolve.

The Drug Enforcement Administration is leading the investigation in this case.

In the early morning hours of June 3, 2023, the crew of the Coast Guard Cutter Heriberto Hernández located a suspect vessel, approximately 75 nautical miles south of St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands. As cutter Heriberto Hernández approached, the crew observed the occupants of the suspect vessel jettison multiple packages overboard. The crew of cutter Heriberto Hernández successfully stopped the suspect vessel that had nine men onboard, who claimed to be Venezuelan nationals. The cutter crew also recovered multiple packages of the jettisoned cargo and seized a total of 10 bales and two additional bags, with individual packages, which tested positive for cocaine.

The crew of cutter Heriberto Hernández embarked the nine detainees and seized contraband that were later transferred to cutter Charles David Jr. for final transport to San Juan, Puerto Rico.

"We appreciate the efforts of Cutter Heriberto Hernández's crew as well as the work and collaboration of all other Coast Guard personnel, units and partner agencies involved in this case," said Lt. Cmdr. Edward Kunigonis, Sector San Juan chief of enforcement. "The daily work and collaboration with our federal, local and regional partners is critical to achieving successful outcomes like in this case to help safeguard the Caribbean region from this threat."

"Today's successful interdiction and seizure underscore the relentless commitment and collaboration of our federal, local, and regional partners in combating drug trafficking in the

Caribbean,” said DEA Special Agent in Charge Denise Foster. “The efforts of the Coast Guard and all agencies involved in this operation are vital to our mission of safeguarding our communities from the scourge of narcotics. The DEA will continue to lead the investigation to ensure that those responsible for these crimes are brought to justice.”

The Coast Guard’s efforts under Operation Unified Resolve contribute to the interagency results being achieved daily under Operation Caribbean Guard, which coordinates efforts between the Coast Guard, DHS, and Commonwealth and Territorial law enforcement partners, who are working diligently to deter, detect and disrupt illicit maritime trafficking to Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The Caribbean Corridor Strike Force is an initiative of the U.S. Attorney’s Office created to disrupt and dismantle major drug trafficking organizations operating in the Caribbean. CCSF is part of the High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA) and Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force (OCDETF) that investigates South American-based drug trafficking organizations responsible for the movement of multi-kilogram quantities of narcotics using the Caribbean as a transshipment point for further distribution to the United States. The initiative is composed of HSI, the U.S. Attorney for the District of Puerto Rico, the Drug Enforcement Administration, the FBI, the Coast Guard, CBP and Puerto Rico Police Department’s Joint Forces for Rapid Action.