



# Department of Justice

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Middle District of Florida

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## SIX COCAINE SMUGGLERS SENTENCED

TAMPA, Fla. – Six crew members of a narcotics smuggling vessel encountered in the Caribbean earlier this year as part of Operation Panama Express were sentenced earlier this month to terms of imprisonment of eight to 14 years. The crew members smuggled 587 kilograms of cocaine with a street value of more than \$17 million.

On Feb. 22, 2008, the U.S. Coast Guard cutter Dauntless encountered the Miss Alyssa, a 78-foot Honduran fishing vessel, at approximately 130 nautical miles north of Sanblas, Panama. The Miss Alyssa was traveling from Cartagena, Colombia to an unknown location off the coast of Honduras. During boarding of the vessel, Coast Guard and other law enforcement officers discovered approximately 30 bales of cocaine concealed within a fuel tank on the vessel.

Three Colombian nationals, Julio Cesar Ortega-Perez, 33, Jose Domitilo, 36, and Julio Telles-Milton, 54, and four Honduran nationals, Harry Elmer Rich-Hernandez, 32, Hector Oscar Bernadez-Rochez, 39, Julio Jose Matute-Solis, 49, and Edgardo Francisco Martinez-Castillo, 35, were arrested and brought to the United States to face prosecution. The entire crew pleaded guilty to drug charges in May 2008.

On August 8, 2008, U.S. District Judge Steven D. Merryday sentenced Jose Domitilo to nine years in prison. On August 14, 2008, Judge Merryday sentenced Julio Telles-Milton to 11 years and three months in prison, Edgardo Francisco Martinez-Castillo to 14 years in prison, Hector Oscar Bernadez-Rochez to 11 years and three months in prison, Harry Elmer Rich-Hernandez to 11 years and three months in prison, and Julio Jose Matute-Solis to eight years and one month in prison. Julio Cesar Ortega-Perez is pending sentencing on September 29, 2008.

Panama Express Strike Force North (PANEX) is a federally approved Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force (OCDETF) consisting of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the Drug Enforcement Administration, United States Coast Guard, Internal Revenue Service, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Pinellas County Sheriff's Office, and the Florida Department of Law Enforcement. Operation Panama Express North currently targets Colombian maritime smuggling organizations responsible for cocaine trafficking throughout the Caribbean to the United States and elsewhere for distribution.

The case was prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Jeffrey Downing.

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