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ICE, USCG & CBP TEAM UP TO SEIZE 27,000 CUBAN CIGARS AND CUBAN RUM

Fort Myers, Florida - United States Attorney Robert E. O'Neill today announced that a grand jury returned two separate indictments against Martin Sengseis, age 43, and Douglas Hiner, age 68, both of Ft. Myers. Each are charged with illegally importing Cuban cigars and other merchandise including Cuban rum into the United States. If convicted, each faces a maximum sentence of 20 years of imprisonment.

According to court documents, there were two separate sailboat smuggling ventures involving the importation into the United States of Cuban manufactured merchandise.

On May 13, 2008, United States Coast Guard (USCG) and Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) Marine Interdiction Agents intercepted and boarded a sailboat owned and captained by Douglas Hiner. The 53-foot sloop, named "Vitamin Sea" was returning from Havana, Cuba, carrying 361 Cuban cigars and Cuban cigarettes. CBP and USCG investigators discovered approximately 26 specialized compartments constructed for smuggling during their boarding of the "Vitamin Sea." This investigation led to the discovery of a storage facility in North Fort Myers used by Hiner to store Cuban cigars and rum where agents seized some 27,000 assorted Cuban cigars and 42 bottles of rum.

On February 27, 2008, a federal grand jury indicted Martin Sengseis, who upon his return from Havana, Cuba, ran his 51-foot sailing vessel aground near Fort Myers Beach. During the course of a routine boarding, a Coast Guard Boarding Officer noticed several

items of Cuban origin in plain view. Marine Interdiction Agents stationed in Fort Myers assisted in a secondary search of the sailing vessel. During the joint USCG/CBP boarding, agents discovered the Austrian-flagged "Golden Eagle" had numerous hidden compartments, constructed for the purpose of smuggling. In those compartments, CBP agents and USCG officers discovered 364 boxes of Cuban cigars, 45 bottles of Cuban rum, 30 pounds of Cuban coffee and 100 cartons of Cuban cigarettes.

Both of these seizures stemmed from a joint investigation by ICE, USCG, and CBP into the smuggling of illegal merchandise into the United States from Cuba.

"These men mistakenly thought they could get away with their illegal merchandise smuggling venture," said Robert Weber, Special Agent in Charge of ICE's office investigations in Tampa. "We want to make it clear that ICE and its law enforcement partners will not tolerate the exploitation of our country's immigrations and customs laws and will investigate, arrest, and hold accountable those who do."

"This case underscores the spirit of interagency cooperation that led to a smooth process of apprehension," said Captain Joseph A. Servidio, Commanding Officer of Coast Guard Sector, St. Petersburg. "We have a long history of collaborative work with our partners at Customs and Border Protection and Immigration and Customs Enforcement that allows for information and resource sharing, which we are strengthening continually."

Both cases are being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Robert P. Barclift.

An indictment or complaint is merely formal charge that a defendant has committed a violation of the federal criminal laws, and every defendant is presumed innocent unless, and until proven guilty.