

They paid thousands to reach South Florida in a smuggling boat. It ended with all of them detained.

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May 30, 2019

They came from many parts of the world, clustering onto a smuggler's boat in the Bahamas for a final 60-mile trek. They paid thousands of dollars to cross the Atlantic — in pursuit of a better life in Florida.

South Florida's popularity as a destination for migrants came once again to the forefront Wednesday afternoon when this group, including a pregnant woman from Haiti and child from Sierra Leone, made it all the way from Bimini to the shores of Pompano Beach crowded in a 25-foot boat. It caught authorities' attention to see a vessel weighed down by so many passengers near the Hillsboro Inlet Marina.

The group of 12 migrants was comprised of four Jamaicans, three Haitians, three Turkish nationals, and two people from Sierra Leone. The journey ended with all of them in custody.

In addition to the migrants, the boat captain, 29-year-old D'Angelo Dino Dean, of the Bahamas, was held on the charge of alien smuggling, records show. He told authorities he was one of the two captains: The other man was "one of the first people to jump off the boat" and vanished before authorities could nab him.

Deputies with the Broward sheriff's marine unit were on routine patrol along the Intracoastal Waterway near Pompano Beach about 5:30 p.m. Wednesday, when they spotted a suspicious-looking white Hydrasport boat. They noticed that "the bow of the vessel was unusually low, which is an indication of a heavy load," according to a criminal complaint.

As the deputies neared, the captain of the migrants' boat appeared to steer the vessel from the channel toward the shore, and then the migrants began trying to get away. They ignored the deputies' commands for them to stop as some swam toward the shore.

When the boat took off, the sheriff's deputies followed. The captain stopped near a pier on the Hillsboro Inlet. Deputies boarded and found the other migrants still aboard.

The three Turkish nationals told authorities they had traveled together from Turkey to the Bahamas. Once in the Bahamas, they searched for a captain of a vessel to take them to the United States, paying \$5,000 to \$7,000 each to be smuggled, according to the criminal complaint. One of them said he also paid the captain an extra \$11,000 once he boarded the boat.

Dean told authorities that the vessel belongs to his cousin; officials said the cousin and his brother “are known human smugglers and have been previously arrested in the U.S. for smuggling.” Dean said he was taking turns navigating the boat with another man and would be paid \$4,000 to \$5,000 to do it. The other man was one of the first people to jump off the boat and eluded capture, according to the criminal complaint.

Nestor Iglesias, spokesman for Department of Homeland Security Investigations, said the case centers on smuggling — not human trafficking.

“Smuggling, traditionally, is where someone pays a fee to be taken from point A to point B,” he said. “Trafficking involves force, fraud or coercion. This was smuggling.”

It’s common for smuggling operations to come through the Bahamas, because it’s just a stone’s throw from South Florida, said Derek Gordon, the assistant special agent in charge of Department of Homeland Security Investigations in Fort Lauderdale. “Bahamas is used as a staging location because of the easy access to the island, and which in turn is in close proximity to the United States,” Gordon said.

When migrants from multiple countries arrive on the same boat, they usually are on the last leg of their journey, and it’s often from Mexico or the Bahamas, said Alex Nowrasteh, director of Immigration Studies at the Cato Institute, a think tank in Washington, D.C.

“A smuggler will help them get that far on a tourist visa to those countries and then get connected with another smuggler. These smugglers have international connections,” he said. “They could get smuggled part of the way and then [are] handed off to someone else or [stay] part of the same smuggling operation sometimes.

“It’s a market with a lot of complexity and a lot of different options.”

In many cases, larger criminal organizations have replaced smaller, mom-and-pop smuggling operations. “They know the smuggling routes much more, they know how to evade border patrol much better,” he said.

More than 2,000 people tried to enter the country illegally last year in a portion of the country that includes the coast of Florida, Georgia, and North Carolina and South Carolina, according to Keith Smith, a spokesman for the U.S. Customs and Border Protection Office. Figures were not available for Florida alone.

The migrants detained in Pompano, whose names weren’t released, remained in the custody of Border Patrol on Thursday. The majority of them were men. Authorities didn’t specify the age or gender of the child, other than to say the minor was accompanied by the child’s mother.

If the migrants are turned over to Immigration and Customs Enforcement, an agency within the Department of Homeland Security, they could be sent to a detention center.

The migrants’ trip appeared to have taken some planning, said John Pratt, a Miami-based immigration attorney not involved in the case. “Usually when you have a boat and you have a hodgepodge of nationalities, they’re paying people who are involved in smuggling thousands of dollars,” he said.

Pratt said migrants in such cases face deportation unless they can present a legitimate claim for asylum, where they successfully demonstrate they faced danger in their homeland. “What’s their

claim? What's the basis for their fear?" he said. "You have to present your claim in front of an immigration judge."