

## AGENTS RAID FISHING VILLAGE, ARREST 44 ON DRUG

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By Jim Leusner of The Sentinel Staff

SANTA ISABEL, PUERTO RICO - For years, residents of this idyllic fishing village on the island's southern coast have lived with rumors of drug smuggling.

Boats made unusual trips at night, heading offshore toward other vessels or circling airplanes. If residents had suspicions, they kept their mouths shut out of fear of drug gangs and hired thugs police blame for more than 100 murders.

On Wednesday, a swarm of 200 federal and local agents brought the rumors into the open with a raid on a group accused of smuggling tons of Colombian cocaine and other drugs to Florida, New York and other states since 1995.

Authorities said they arrested 44 people Wednesday. Nine others have been held since January. Suspects include an Orlando man accused of sinking some of the group's drug profits into houses in Apopka and east Orange County. Those four properties were among nine seized, including a Miami restaurant, Cafe Caliente.

A federal indictment handed up Tuesday in San Juan illustrates all the elements of Puerto Rico's drug war: smugglers using high-tech electronics to elude capture; a corrupt police officer accused of aiding the ring; and violent street gangs that deal drugs and kill their rivals and debtors.

Agents said the group had handled up to 2,200 pounds of cocaine a month.

"We wiped out an entire import-export organization," said Felix Jimenez, head of U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration operations in Puerto Rico and the Caribbean. "They imported cocaine into Puerto Rico and exported it to the mainland. And we took out an entire family."

Wednesday's arrests centered on the family of Jouhan Rivera-Rosa of Santa Isabel. Rivera, 23, has been jailed in the Dominican Republic with eight others since Jan. 31. At least 18 relatives of Rivera also were among those indicted, including his wife, mother, stepfather, various aunts, uncles and in-laws. Rivera's 75-year-old grandmother was charged with failing to report drug smuggling activity.

Officials said Gilbert Feliciano-Garcia, 29, of Orlando used drug profits to buy one house for \$140,000 last October and three more for \$365,000 a month later. Agents said the smugglers used custom-made, low-slung fiberglass boats equipped with global positioning navigational devices and satellite telephones to avoid detection.

Wednesday's raids began at 5:30 a.m., as convoys carrying agents from the DEA, U.S. Customs Service, Puerto Rico Police Department and the island's Special Investigations Bureau fanned out across towns from Ponce to Guayama.

As a bright orange sun rose over the mountains, cars and trucks carrying police with machine guns and shotguns sped by workers toiling in onion fields and schoolgirls waiting for school buses. A Customs helicopter awoke residents as it hovered above modest homes and tin-roofed shacks raided by arrest teams.

"Oh my God, they took him," wailed Lydia Santiago after police arrested her son, Raymond, 24, accused of helping unload drug boats.

The mother of Rafael Arias-Santos, 35, another alleged shiphand, denied he was involved. "He has a hard time paying \$25 weekly alimony," said Maria Victoria Santos. Also charged was Angel Sotomayor-Torres, 44, a member of an elite Puerto Rico police air and maritime unit, known as FURA.

"He was the person giving information on how to move around our patrols in the area," said Col. Jose Rivera, FURA commander.

All of those arrested Wednesday were taken to a makeshift court held in a barracks at Camp Santiago, a military base. U.S. Magistrate Justo Arenas ordered most detained until bail hearings later this week.

In Orlando, meanwhile, Feliciano-Garcia was released on \$75,000 bail while awaiting an arraignment April 16 in San Juan. During the 14-month probe, agents seized more than 3,000 pounds of cocaine, 5,000 pounds of marijuana and 1 1/2 pounds of heroin and nearly \$2 million in cash, vehicles and real estate. Jimenez said the investigation will be shifting to who smuggled the drugs to the mainland.

Several residents of Santa Isabel, 55 miles southwest of San Juan, were happy about the arrests. One man said it was well known that Jouhan Rivera's mother and her family used their six fishing boats to haul drugs. The mother's two-story villa, easily the most impressive home in town, was seized. Another resident talked of Colombians and unfamiliar boats in the area recently. He said two warring drug gangs control the village.

"Don't put my name in the paper," the man said. "The people from Colombia will kill me." SIB Director Anibal Torres said street distributors for the Rivera group were members of the Martinez gang, which had terrorized the region in recent years.

"They wouldn't hesitate to kill anyone," he said. "They are responsible for more than 100 murders."

The raid followed a congressional hearing last week where federal officials pledged more help to fight the cartels. Agents said the roundup shows cooperation can bring results.

"This area has been unattended by the federal government because of a lack of resources," said Guillermo Gil, U.S. attorney for Puerto Rico. "The south coast of Puerto Rico has been abandoned by the federal government."