Cocaine Seizure Biggest In History Of Louisiana

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Authorities continued Friday to disassemble a South American cargo freighter in which an estimated $40 million worth of drugs was found secreted behind false bulkheads.

State and federal police uncovered what was called the largest seizure of cocaine in Louisiana history after several hours of searching the 255-foot freighter Andoria.

Arrested were the ship’s owner and 14 crew members, only one of which is a U.S. citizen.

The ship was boarded Thursday afternoon upon its arrival at a downtown wharf on the Mississippi River, and police were initially unable to find any of the drugs they had been tipped would be aboard.

About 2 a.m. Friday, agents found 96 pounds of cocaine and an estimated 10 tons of marijuana hidden behind false walls that had been welded shut.

Robert Bryden, assistant special agent in charge of the Drug Enforcement Administration’s New Orleans office, said police expected to find more drugs as the search continued.

“On a ship that big, there’s just an ungodly amount of places where you can hide stuff,” he said.

Dick Schneider, acting director of the Customs Service at New Orleans, said it was the “largest seizure of drugs in the New Orleans area in the last 10 years.”

Schneider said the ship might be “in kit form” before agents call off the search.

Bryden said the cocaine was found in an oxygen tank stashed behind a false bulkhead in the bow of the ship. The marijuana was welded behind another false wall in the cargo hold, he said.

He said the illicit cargo was unusually well-hidden, and said the reason was apparently that the ship had been forced to seek port for engine repairs before delivering it.

“The crew told us that the boat was here for repairs, and there was some documentation that repair work had been scheduled,” he said.

Bryden said the Andoria, which was flying a British flag, arrived in New Orleans from the Cayman Islands in the British West Indies, and had stopped earlier in Columbia and Honduras.

He said the 15 persons aboard the ship would probably be charged with conspiracy to import narcotics.

Among the suspects is the boat’s alleged owner, Crosby Newball. Bryden said Newball is a 53-year-old Honduran who had been posing as the ship’s engineer.

Newball reportedly told police he paid

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$250,000 for the ship, which authorities said was used almost exclusively for smuggling.

Bryden said the freighter was typical of the increasing number of “mother ships” ferrying drugs to Gulf coastal waters.

“It was in bad repair, the paint was chipped — it was the kind of boat smugglers use for a mother ship,” he said.

Bryden said such operations are “more typical than we’d like to admit.”

He said heavy coastal patrols along the Florida coast have forced smugglers to move their operations west along the coast to Louisiana and other Gulf states.

Arrested with Newball was the ship’s captain, Pablo Cruz, a 45-year-old Honduran who Bryden said was naturalized as a U.S. citizen in Miami.

The other arrested crew members were identified as Gonsalo Perez, 32; Paul Navarrette, 30; Luis Menjivar, 45; Adam Eluy, 46; Ruben Sanchez, 35; Magarito Munez, 48; Ernesto Tragandona, 34; Hector Betancourt, 34; George Adamson, 32; Jacinto Velez, 34; Luis Navarrette, 39; Orlando Olmedo, 35; and Pablo Alvarez, 33.

Bryden said the crewmen were residents of Jamaica, Honduras, Columbia and Ecuador. He said many of them have records of previous smuggling arrests.