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US arrests Turkish national for alleged scheme to help Venezuela skirt sanctions



Adis Ajdin • November 5, 2024 🔥 3,261 📖 2 minutes read



US authorities have arrested a Turkish national for allegedly conspiring to violate sanctions as part of a scheme to ship oil from Venezuela.

The Justice Department said Taskin Torlak, 37, has been charged by complaint with one count to having conspired with others to cause US financial institutions to process transactions connected to the transport oil for the benefit of Petróleos de Venezuela (PdVSA), which has been under OFAC sanctions since January 2019.

Torlak is alleged to have led a complex scheme since about November 2020 to ship oil and petroleum products from Venezuela and Iran by renaming and reflagging vessels, including covering the tankers' names with paint or blankets and turning off their AIS.

Torlak and his co-conspirators allegedly received tens of millions of dollars from Venezuela's state-owned company in payment for transporting the oil, and hid the ultimate beneficiaries of the related transactions from US officials, agencies and shipping companies.

US financial institutions, who then unwittingly processed payments in furtherance of the scheme. The complaint further alleges that Torlak and his co-conspirators explicitly discussed the need to hide their conduct from the U.S. Government and its agencies, including OFAC, as well as commercial maritime entities.

"As alleged, the defendant conspired to evade US sanctions imposed on PdVSA, deploying deception to smuggle black-market oil from Venezuela," said assistant attorney general Matthew Olsen of the Justice Department's National Security Division. "The Justice Department will continue to hold accountable those involved in criminal efforts to circumvent sanctions imposed on the Maduro regime."

In related sanctions-busting moves, a year ago, *Splash* reported that a Turkish owner, Imza Marine, had added a 16-year-old VLCC *Jiu Yue*, and renamed it *Gesi* for \$48m. Six months ago, the vessel's management was transferred to another Turkish account, Route Shipping. The Turkish-owned vessel is now widely sold for over \$43m, with brokers noting that the price tag is discounted as it has sailed in murky waters. The vessel has been renamed *White Crane*, with Myra Marine, a registered outfit at Trust Company Complex at Ajeltake Road in Marshall Island and appears to have gone undercover.

TankerTrackers.com tells *Splash* that, regarding sanctions violations, the tanker exported fuel oil out of Venezuela directly in March 2023. The ship also received Venezuelan fuel oil via ship-to-ship transfer in Dakar, Senegal, in May 2024 from a 2004-built VLCC named *Big Star*, which departed Venezuela in late March 2024.

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