

Seizure of Ship Helps Officials Trace Route of Illegal Immigrants

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Body

With the seizure of a freighter that is suspected of smuggling Asian immigrants into the Bahamas this week, Federal officials said they were beginning to piece together the circuitous journey of 23 Chinese men who illegally landed on a New Jersey beach two weeks ago.

The 120-foot-long ship seized in the Atlantic Ocean, the Oriental I, may have been a so-called mother ship used in one phase of a smuggling operation involving many vessels, the authorities said.

The Oriental I, now in the custody of the United States Coast Guard, was intercepted about 195 miles east of San Salvador Island on Monday. Only an eight-man crew -- comprising four Venezuelan and four Korean nationals -- was on board at the time it was seized. But the day before, United States Customs officials, watching from an airplane, saw a group of people leaving the ship in a speedboat, which raced them to Great Abaco Island in the Bahamas.

Bahamian police were alerted and later found 24 Asian men -- 23 from China and 1 from Malaysia -- hiding near the island town of Hole in the Wall. Those men have been detained as illegal aliens.

Federal officials say they believe the freighter, which is registered in Venezuela, also played a role in the smuggling of the Chinese immigrants who were dumped on the beach at Bay Head, N.J., on May 30.

The immigrants had traveled near the American coast on the Oriental I and were then transferred to a smaller boat, the Oops II, the authorities said. But the Oops II lost its way in dense fog and ran aground, leaving the immigrants to jump into the surf and flee toward the mansions lining the shore of the wealthy town.

The men were apprehended over the next few days and taken to the Immigration and Naturalization Service detention center in Elizabeth, N.J. The immigrants' lawyers have said they will all ask for political asylum because they fear persecution in China, either for their religious beliefs or their opposition to the one-child policy.

Officials said they doubted that either group of immigrants -- those who ended up in New Jersey and those who were caught in the Bahamas -- had traveled all the way from China on the freighter.

A lawyer for one of the immigrants who landed in New Jersey said that the smuggling route began in South America, the Associated Press reported.

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"My guy's trip took about two months," said the lawyer, Jules E. Coven. He said his client, Dian Lu Jiang, flew from China to Suriname before boarding the first of three boats involved in the trip.

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