

TRIAL BEGINS FOR 3 ACCUSED OF SMUGGLING ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS / A BOAT CARRYING 23 CHINESE MEN RAN AGROUND IN BAY HEAD IN MAY, EXPOSING THE OPERATION.

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Body

Lawyers for the captain, mechanic and cook of a ship used to ferry illegal Chinese immigrants to U.S. shores questioned yesterday whether the three men knew the Oriental I was being used for alien-smuggling.

Such knowledge is needed to convict the three South Koreans, the lawyers told a federal jury as their trial began.

"We have a mechanic who is being charged as part of an international conspiracy. It's absurd," said Andrew Samson, lawyer for Jiang Yong Zhu.

The smuggling operation was exposed in May when 23 Chinese men were left to wander mansion-lined streets after the powerboat taking them ashore from the "mother ship" ran aground in Bay Head.

In his opening statement, Assistant U.S. Attorney Vaughn McKoy maintained that two men who have pleaded guilty to roles in the botched operation, as well as at least one of the Chinese men, will testify that the accused men were well aware of what they were doing with their human cargo.

"They did it for the money," McKoy said.

Each of the Chinese men paid the smugglers up to \$40,000 to come to the United States, according to court papers filed by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Alexander E. Jardines, lawyer for Kim Jong Che, captain of the Oriental I, wondered whether there would be evidence of an agreement among the suspects that shows they intended to bring the Chinese men to America.

John M. Vazquez, lawyer for Piao Zhen Jia, said his client was hired as a cook for a fishing boat, which is what the Oriental I appeared to be when it shipped out of Venezuela.

"And after the boat gets out to sea, illegal aliens are brought aboard," Vazquez said. "Where is he going to go at that point?"

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He asked the jury to remember that the admitted smugglers can get more lenient sentences if the prosecution finds they were helpful.

Each of the South Koreans faces two charges, conspiracy and smuggling, which each carry up to 10 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine.

The trial, before U.S. District Judge Dickinson R. Debevoise, is expected to last two weeks.

The 23 illegal immigrants, all young men from the southeastern province of Fujian, remained in federal custody until September, when prosecutors said they had sufficient information from depositions taken from four of them.

Their requests for political asylum are pending before immigration judges.

The Oops II, the 30-foot powerboat that took them to shore, landed eight miles south of the intended drop in Belmar, where smugglers were waiting with a van to take them to New York City, according to court papers.

The 120-foot Oriental I had taken the immigrants from off the coast of Suriname in South America to New Jersey, the documents said. They had been flown to Suriname, McKoy said.

After the ill-fated drop to the Oops II, the Oriental I continued on to the Caribbean, where another group of more than 20 Chinese immigrants was dropped in the Bahamas on June 7.

The Oriental I crew, including several of the South Koreans and four Venezuelans, were taken into custody, but the Venezuelans were returned to their homeland for prosecution.

The operator of the Oriental I is among those who have pleaded guilty, admitting the vessel made up to five smuggling trips between South America and the United States.

The pilot of the Oops II, Charng Seon "Jason" Choi of New York, remains at large. State police questioned him after the boat ran aground on a foggy night but released him before authorities realized he had been carrying human cargo.

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