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Oceana exposes Galician connections between cocaine, illegal fishing and shark catches

“Mafia Gallega” is the nickname for a group of vessel owners engaged in pirate fishing and organized crime.

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Madrid -- Last week, the owner of one of the Galician fishing companies, Jose Nogueira Garcia, was arrested as one responsible member of a ring of cocaine smugglers who tried to ship 2,2 tons of cocaine to Spain, using containers with frozen fish and fishing vessels, with a market value of more than 70 million Euro.

Oceana had exposed in several occasions both, Nogueira Garcias fishing company “Sabarigo Mar” and their fishing vessel “Cibeles” for the use of a “flag of convenience” and their likely engagement in illegal fishing, the first time back in 2004.

“Mafia Gallega” is a synonym for a group of diversified fishing companies, engaged in pirate fishing. They are originating from Galicia in Spain and nowadays operate mainly from West Africa, Namibia and Uruguay. Their modern industrial fishing vessels are either running cheap “flags of convenience” or the flags of the countries from where they operate.

Jose Nogueira Garcia operates the Uruguayan flagged fishing vessels “Cibeles” and “Banzare”. The vessels are currently of great concern for Uruguay’s Fisheries authorities since their Uruguayan fishing licences are expired. Nevertheless, one of them, the “Banzare” is now on its third trip to Durban, South Africa for transshipment. The second vessel “Cibeles” has been seized in Montevideo.

In general, fishing vessels and containers with frozen fish are ideal to smuggle drugs as controls are difficult and virtually not existing, especially in Vigo, Spain, where the largest fishing port of Europe is located. Only six fisheries inspectors, currently partly on strike, are responsible there for the control of more than 880.000 tons of fish unloadings during 2007.

In December 2005, Oceana published a report about the extremely destructive fisheries of deepsea sharks, mainly for the almost depleted stocks of Portuguese dogfish, leafscale gulper sharks and anglerfish. At that time, the fishery was completely unregulated. Oceana exposed the “Cibeles” again as one of the vessels involved. Deepsea sharks are mainly caught for their liver oil or Squalene, which is an expensive ingredient for cosmetics.

The “Cibeles” was for many years a British flagged fishing vessel and it is a good example for the failed fishing policy of the European Union. Due to their British flag, the “Cibeles”, under Spanish ownership and management, could take advantage of British fishing possibilities in the Northeast Atlantic, what creates problems for controls and responsibilities. In 2008, the old vessel finally left the European Union fleet, and instead of being scrapped, reflagged this time to Uruguay to get involved directly in illegal activities. The “Cibeles” is still licensed to fish in international waters of the Atlantic by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT), obtained under the United Kingdom flag and wrongly maintained.

The “Banzare” is a longline vessel, operated by Nogueira Garcias company Elprinths SA in Montevideo. The vessel is licensed for fishing Patagonian toothfish in the Antarctic by the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR).

Oceana appeals to the governments to stop talking about the fight against IUU fishing but actually start it. IUU fishing is an environmental crime and therefore all vessels of companies that have been exposed to be engaged in IUU activities must be blacklisted by all Regional Fisheries Management Organisations and the European Union and scrapped. “It is a shame that several NGO’s and scientists exposed British flagged and Spanish owned fishing vessels and their owners for their illegal or unregulated fishing activities and nothing has happened for years” says Oceana campaign director Ricardo Aguilar, “the vessels can still fish legally or illegally for threatened species as “Patagonian Toothfish” and “Deepsea sharks”.

Oceana affirms that States must adopt and enforce legislation to make it illegal to import or trade in IUU caught fish. Moreover, States should make it illegal or otherwise discourage companies (e.g. insurers, resuppliers, fishing gear manufacturers) from doing business with companies engaged in IUU fishing. Retailers must take responsibility and make sure they are not trading IUU fish.

The “Cibeles” and “Banzare” cases are good examples to show action against IUU fishing. The International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) and the Convention for the Conservation of Living Antarctic

Marine Resources must take immediate action and blacklist these fishing vessels.

Oceana is currently investigating other shark fishing activities of the "Mafia Gallega".