

'Blackmailed' Latvian Smuggler Sentenced to 25 Years

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Latvian drug smuggler Janis Zegelis walking out of a Bermuda courthouse.

A Latvian who claimed he was blackmailed by a Russian man and forced to smuggle \$48 million worth of cocaine from Trinidad to Eastern Europe was sentenced to 25 years in jail by a court in Bermuda on Tuesday.

Janis Zegelis, 29, said he thought he was simply transporting a 38-foot craft named Arturs for a Russian client until he discovered 166 kilograms of cocaine and a Beretta pistol with 192 rounds of ammunition hidden in the ship's hold, the local Royal Gazette reported.

When confronted, the Russian client, whom Zegelis refused to identify in court, threatened to kill him and his family if he didn't deliver the drugs to the Denmark Channel, he told the court in broken English.

Defense lawyer Mark Pettingill said Zegelis was being threatened by a Russian mobster.

“He could have thrown it over the side and gone to the Russians and said, ‘Oh, sorry, I lost your \$48 million in a storm,’ but that’s not the real world,” Pettingill said, the Gazette reported.

Investigators argued that Zegelis had actually turned to drug trafficking to dig his family out of dire financial straits.

Zegelis, a father of three young children, pleaded for leniency, but the jury unanimously found him guilty on all charges.

He had been arrested in August 2011, about one week after ship damage allegedly forced him to make an unscheduled stop in the port of St. George’s.

The drug haul was the second-largest ever seized in the British territory, trailing only a 586-kilogram stash that authorities discovered in 2001.

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