

At least five migrants drowned, 66 rescued in waters off Puerto Rico

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The U.S. Coast Guard says the migrants drowned after being forced out of their boat by people smugglers

San Juan, July 29 (RHC)--At least five migrants drowned and another 66 were rescued in an incident involving a suspected human smuggling boat near an uninhabited island west of Puerto Rico, officials in the United States have said.

The bodies were found on Thursday by Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources Park Rangers on Mona Island, the Coast Guard said in a statement, adding that 66 survivors including

two minors were safely ashore.

“The smugglers basically forced the migrants to disembark. It appears that five of the migrants drowned in the process,” Jeffrey Quinones, public affairs officer for U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), told the Reuters news agency in a telephone interview.

U.S. Coast Guard spokesman Ricardo Castrodad told The Associated Press that the boat fled the scene, and it was unclear how many people were on board at that time. A CBP official told the Miami Herald newspaper that most of the people are believed to be Haitians.

The incident is the latest in a string of deadly voyages across the northern Caribbean carrying mostly Haitians fleeing their country amid a spike in gang-related killings and kidnappings. Many of the Haitians have been heading to the United States.

Most try to enter the U.S. by land, through the southern border with Mexico. But starting in March 2020, the U.S. has been imposing Title 42, a pandemic-era rule that has prevented the majority of people from claiming asylum at the border. Under the measure, many Haitians have been expelled to their crisis-stricken island on board deportation flights.

The incident came just days after authorities in the Bahamas recovered the bodies of 17 migrants and rescued 25 others after their boat capsized. A criminal investigation is continuing.

On May, 11 Haitian women drowned and 38 others were saved after their boat sank near Puerto Rico. Meanwhile in March, a wooden boat carrying 300 Haitians capsized in shallow waters near the coast of Florida, and many required medical attention.

A least two Coast Guard helicopters and two patrol boats were dispatched to the scene of the incident on Thursday, according to the Miami Herald.

Mona Island, a nature reserve, is located between the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico and has over the years been used by smugglers carrying people between the two. Those on that route are typically Dominican or Haitian.

“A lot of times [smugglers] leave people on Mona Island, leading them to believe that they’re in Puerto Rico,” Joel Seijo, a spokesman for Puerto Rico’s Department of Natural and Environmental Resources told Reuters.

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