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Durban - Four South African women employed as crew for MSC Cruises have been arrested for allegedly smuggling cocaine to Miami, in the US.

According to a report in the Miami Herald, US Customs and Border Protection found six crew members with 7kg of cocaine in their possession or in their cabins during a drug-sweep of the vessel the MSC Seaside on November 17. The paper reported that another MSC employee, Damion Hawthorne, 32, was arrested on charges of hiring five crew members for a smuggling operation.

Federal prosecutors alleged Hawthorne recruited Londiwe Shange, 27, Wandile Mhlongo, 29, and Thembeke Sokhulu, 36, all from Durban, and Viwe Tshaka, 23, from Lusikisiki in the Eastern Cape, to pick up drugs when the MSC Seaside docked in Jamaica, and deliver them to someone in Miami.

Shange, Mhlongo and Sokhulu reportedly told investigators they had each earned around \$2000 (R27394) for every "drug run" made over the past few months, according to court papers. Tshaka reportedly said it was her first run.

They face charges of importing a controlled substance, conspiracy to import a controlled substance, possession of a controlled substance with intent to distribute it, and conspiracy to possess a controlled substance with intent to distribute it. If found guilty, they face a sentence of between 10 years and life imprisonment, said Sokhulu's attorney, Roger De Jesus Cabrera.

US Customs and Border Protection officers also found just under 1kg of cocaine in each of the backpacks of Errol Roy Sutherland, 39, and Carl Michael Smith, 27, it was reported.

Sutherland reportedly told officers a childhood friend from Jamaica had given him the backpack in September to deliver to someone in Miami. Smith reportedly said he had been making drug

runs for about four months.

All seven suspects are being held in custody with bail set at \$250 000 (R3.4million). They appeared in the Miami Federal Court on December 3 and pleaded not guilty.

Alyssa Goldfarb, a spokesperson for MSC Cruises, told the Miami Herald all crew were searched coming and going from the ship in Miami. MSC also hired a private security company that used dogs to search for contraband while the ship was in the port, she said.

Speaking from Miami, Cabrera said the case was still in its early stages.

“They were arrested on November 17 and only indicted (formally charged) on the Thursday. On the Monday they pleaded not guilty. We have not yet received any discoveries or evidence from the plaintiffs, so we are waiting. It should come in the next two weeks. Then we’ll understand the extent of what we are dealing with.”

He said Sokhulu was being held at the Federal Detention Centre in Miami, Florida, and was doing well.

“She is fine and all the others are with her at the centre. Their families have not made contact with us.”

Tshaka’s attorney, Khurram Wahid, confirmed he was representing her, but declined to comment.

South Africa’s Department of International Relations and Co-operation spokesperson Ndivhuwo Mabaya said while it was not aware of the arrests, all South Africans who were arrested had access to consular services.

“We can visit them and co-ordinate their visits, documents and communication with family.”

Patricia Gerber, director of Locked Up, an organisation that assists the families of South Africans suspected of being drug mules, said besides the four, other South Africans had recently been arrested on drug charges.

“A woman was arrested in Turkey and another in the Netherlands, and now these. It is extremely sad that this is happening, but the problem is not there; rather, it is here in South Africa.”

Between April and September, seven South Africans had been arrested for smuggling drugs.

The Mercury

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