

PRESS RELEASE

Nigerian citizen extradited from Germany to face charges over attempt to steal \$25 million in U.S. benefits

Friday, August 18, 2023

For Immediate Release

U.S. Attorney's Office, Western District of Washington

Allegedly successfully obtained over \$2.4 million in pandemic unemployment benefits

Tacoma – One of two Nigerian citizens residing in Canada, who allegedly defrauded the pandemic unemployment benefit programs in multiple states, made his initial appearance in U.S. District Court in Tacoma this afternoon at 2:00 PM. Sakiru Olanrewaju Ambali, 45, was arrested in February 2023, in Frankfurt, Germany, as he traveled back to Canada from Nigeria. Ambali had been detained in Germany pending extradition. He arrived in the Western District of Washington yesterday afternoon.

Ambali and codefendant Fatiu Ismaila Lawal, 45, are accused of using the stolen identities of thousands of Americans to submit over 1,700 claims for pandemic unemployment benefits to over 25 different states, including Washington State.

According to the indictment, Lawal and Ambali used the stolen personal information of thousands of U.S. taxpayers and residents to file fraudulent claims for COVID-19 pandemic assistance and false tax returns seeking refunds. In total, the claims sought approximately \$25 million, but the conspirators obtained approximately \$2.4 million, primarily from pandemic unemployment benefits.

The co-conspirators allegedly submitted claims for pandemic unemployment benefits to more than 25 states including New York, Maryland, Michigan, Nevada, California, and Washington. Using 13 Google accounts they filed some 900 claims. The co-conspirators

also allegedly established four internet domain names that they then used for fraud – creating some 800 different email addresses that were used for fraud.

Lawal and Ambali allegedly filed over 2,300 fraudulent income tax returns seeking over \$7.1 million in tax refunds. The IRS caught most of the fraud and paid only about \$30,000 in fraudulent refunds.

The co-conspirators also attempted to use the stolen American identities for Economic Injury Disaster Loans (EIDL) to defraud the Small Business Administration.

According to the indictment, the co-conspirators had the proceeds of their fraud sent to cash cards or to “money mules” who transferred the funds according to instructions given by the co-conspirators. They also allegedly used stolen identities to open bank accounts and have the money deposited directly into those accounts for their use.

Lawal and Ambali are charged with conspiracy to commit wire fraud, ten counts of wire fraud and six counts of aggravated identity theft.

Lawal remains in Canada, pending extradition.

The conspiracy and wire fraud counts are punishable by up to 30 years in prison. Aggravated identity theft is punishable by a mandatory minimum two years in prison to run consecutive to any other prison time imposed in the case.

The charges contained in the indictment are only allegations. A person is presumed innocent unless and until he or she is proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law.

The National Unemployment Fraud Task Force provided a lead on this case to the investigative team in Western Washington. The case was investigated by the FBI with assistance from U.S. Postal Inspection Service (USPIS) and the Department of Labor Office of Inspector General (DOL-OIG). Also contributing to the investigation were Washington State Employment Security Division (ESD), the Internal Revenue Service Criminal Investigation (IRS-CI), and the Small Business Administration (SBA).

The case is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorneys Cindy Chang and Seth Wilkinson of the Western District of Washington. DOJ’s Office of International Affairs is assisting.

On May 17, 2021, the Attorney General established the COVID-19 Fraud Enforcement Task Force to marshal the resources of the Department of Justice in partnership with

agencies across government to enhance efforts to combat and prevent pandemic-related fraud. The Task Force bolsters efforts to investigate and prosecute the most culpable domestic and international criminal actors and assists agencies tasked with administering relief programs to prevent fraud by augmenting and incorporating existing coordination mechanisms, identifying resources and techniques to uncover fraudulent actors and their schemes, and sharing and harnessing information and insights gained from prior enforcement efforts. For more information on the department's response to the pandemic, please visit <https://www.justice.gov/coronavirus>

Anyone with information about allegations of attempted fraud involving COVID-19 can report it by calling the Department of Justice's National Center for Disaster Fraud (NCDF) Hotline via the NCDF Web Complaint Form at <https://www.justice.gov/disaster-fraud/ncdf-disaster-complaint-form>.

Contact

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