

PRESS RELEASE

# One of two Nigerian citizens who defrauded U.S. Pandemic programs of more than \$1 million pleads guilty

Monday, December 18, 2023

## For Immediate Release

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

## Defendant has been in custody since February 2023 when he was detained in Frankfurt, Germany while traveling home to his residence in Canada

Tacoma – One of two Nigerian citizens who resided in Canada, pleaded guilty today in U.S. District Court in Tacoma to wire fraud and aggravated identity theft for defrauding pandemic unemployment benefit programs in multiple states, announced Acting U.S. Attorney Tessa M. Gorman. Sakiru Olanrewaju Ambali, 45, was arrested in February 2023, in Frankfurt, Germany, as he traveled back to Canada from Nigeria. Ambali was detained in Germany and was extradited to the U.S. last August. Prosecutors will recommend a sentence of five years in prison when Ambali is sentenced by U.S. District Judge Robert J. Bryan on March 14, 2024.

In his plea agreement Ambali admits he and codefendant Fatiu Ismaila Lawal, 45, used the stolen identities of thousands of workers to submit over 1,700 claims for pandemic unemployment benefits to over 25 different states, including Washington State. In total, the claims sought approximately \$25 million, but the conspirators obtained approximately \$2.4 million, primarily from pandemic unemployment benefits. As part of his plea agreement Ambali has agreed to make restitution of \$1,035,107.

The co-conspirators allegedly submitted claims for pandemic unemployment benefits to New York, Maryland, Michigan, Nevada, California, Washington and some 19 other states. 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. Between March 2020 and December 2021, Ambali admits he personally submitted at least 620 claims for unemployment benefits that paid more than \$1 million.

Additionally, between 2018 and 2021, Ambali used stolen personal information of eight U.S. citizens to try to claim tax refunds totaling more than \$40,000. The IRS caught most of the fraud.

Ambali also attempted to use the stolen American identities for Economic Injury Disaster Loans (EIDL) to defraud the Small Business Administration (SBA). The SBA caught most of the fraud and paid only \$2,500.

Ambali and his 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 was arrested in Canada in February and is pending extradition.

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 Attorney Cindy Chang 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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