

PRESS RELEASE

Nigerian who defrauded U.S. pandemic aid programs of more than \$1 million sentenced to 54 months in prison

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For Immediate Release

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

Defendant defrauded Americans for a decade with trove of over 14,000 stolen identities

Tacoma – The second of two Nigerian men residing in Canada who defrauded pandemic aid programs of millions was sentenced today in U.S. District Court in Tacoma to 54 months in prison for wire fraud and aggravated identity theft announced U.S. Attorney Tessa M. Gorman. Fatiu Ismaila Lawal, 46, was extradited from Canada last July, and pleaded guilty in September 2024. At today's sentencing hearing U.S. District Judge Tiffany M. Cartwright said, the crime required substantial planning. "This took advantage of programs designed to help people who were really struggling in an international emergency," Judge Cartwright said.

"This defendant made it his full-time job to defraud the U.S. for years before the pandemic, but he kicked it into high gear once critical aid to Americans workers was flowing," said U.S. Attorney Gorman. "His fraud included using stolen identities of Washington residents to file dozens of unemployment claims in the first few weeks of the pandemic, contributing to the flood of fraudulent claims that caused the state to pause all unemployment payments. In this way his fraud harmed all Washingtonians who desperately needed assistance at the onset of the pandemic."

According to records filed in the case, Lawal, and codefendant Sakiru Olanrewaju Ambali, 46, 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 \$2.7 million, primarily from pandemic unemployment benefits. Lawal admits that he personally submitted claims for \$1,345,472.

Lawal personally submitted at least 790 unemployment claims using the stolen identities of 790 workers. He submitted claims for pandemic unemployment benefits to New York, Maryland, Michigan, Nevada, California, Washington and some 19 other states. Lawal also established four internet domain names that were subsequently used for fraud – creating some 800 different email addresses that were used in this scheme.

Additionally, between 2018 and November 2022, Lawal used stolen personal information to submit 3,000 income tax returns for \$7.5 million in refunds. The IRS detected the fraud and paid just \$30,000.

“While Mr. Lawal may not have secured the \$7.5 million he sought from fraudulent tax refunds, each of the 3,000 returns he filed represents a life he disrupted,” said Adam Jobes, Special Agent in Charge of IRS Criminal Investigation’s Seattle Field Office.

Lawal and co-defendant Ambali also attempted to use the stolen American identities for Economic Injury Disaster Loans (EIDL) to defraud the Small Business Administration (SBA). The pair submitted some 38 applications, but SBA caught most of the fraud and paid only \$2,500.

Lawal and Ambali 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.

Evidence gathered in the case shows that Lawal personally received a substantial portion of the criminal proceeds. Lawal was ordered to pay restitution of \$1,345,472.

Co-defendant Ambali was [sentenced to 42 months in prison in March 2024](#).

In asking for a 65-month prison sentence, the government argued, “During major disasters and nationwide emergencies, it is particularly important for the government to be able to disburse aid quickly to real victims to mitigate the impact of the crisis. The actual monetary loss to the government comes secondary to the fact that a real person or business behind each stolen identity had difficulty accessing assistance because a fraudulent claim was already paid in their identity. These difficulties were further compounded by the onslaught of fraudulent claims that clogged the infrastructure in place to distribute the aid. The estimated loss from these fraudulent pandemic unemployment claims is over \$100 billion.”

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 Internal Revenue Service Criminal Investigation (IRS-CI), Washington State Employment Security Division (ESD), and the Small Business Administration (SBA).

The case was prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Cindy Chang of the Western District of Washington. DOJ's Office of International Affairs assisted with extradition on this matter.

The COVID-19 Fraud Enforcement Task Force was established 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 related to 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>.

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