

PRESS RELEASE

Two Nigerian citizens indicted for attempting to defraud the United States of over \$25 million

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For Immediate Release

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

Defendants used thousands of stolen identities to obtain over \$2.4 million in fraudulent COVID-19 unemployment benefits

Seattle – Two Nigerian citizens who currently reside in Toronto, Canada, have been indicted by a federal grand jury for their scheme to steal COVID-19 disaster benefits and U.S. tax refunds, announced U.S. Attorney Nick Brown. Sakiru Olanrewaju Ambali, 45, was arrested yesterday in Frankfurt, Germany, as he traveled back to Canada from Nigeria. Fatiu Ismaila Lawal, 45, was arrested in Canada. Each defendant remains in Germany or Canada respectively pending extradition to the U.S.

"These men 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," said U.S. Attorney Nick Brown. "My Office is committed to bringing to justice those accused of exploiting a time of crisis to illegally enrich themselves, whether they are in the United States or abroad."

"These arrests demonstrate the Department's commitment to bring together our law enforcement partners and pursue these alleged fraudsters around the world," said Department of Justice Acting Director of COVID-19 Fraud Enforcement Michael C. Galdo. "I applaud the hard work of the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Western District of Washington, thank our domestic and international partners for their continued assistance, and look forward to seeing additional results from the data analysis identifying suspected pandemic relief fraud."

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 over 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 some 2300 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 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.

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>.
[lawal and ambali indictment.pdf](#) (1.67 MB)

Contact

Press contact for the U.S. Attorney's Office is Communications Director Emily Langlie at (206) 553-4110 or Emily.Langlie@usdoj.gov.

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