

Department of Justice

U.S. Attorney's Office

Northern District of Illinois

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Three Family Members Charged in Child Labor Trafficking Conspiracy in Chicago Suburbs

CHICAGO — Three family members have been indicted on a labor trafficking conspiracy charge for allegedly forcing two undocumented West African teenagers to work in the Chicago suburbs.

NAWOMI AWOGA, 71, of Hazel Crest, and her two daughters, MARINA OKE, also known as Marina Fandohan, 34, of Country Club Hills, and ASSIBA LEA FANDOHAN, 31, of Hazel Crest, are charged with conspiracy to conceal, harbor, and shield from detection two children from the West African country of Benin, according to an indictment returned in U.S. District Court in Chicago. The indictment also charges the defendants with forcing labor through threats of serious harm to a victim or another person.

The defendants were arrested Monday. Awoga is scheduled to make an initial court appearance on Aug. 5, 2020, at 3:00 p.m., before U.S. Magistrate Judge Young B. Kim, while Oke and Fandohan will appear before Judge Kim for detention hearings on Aug. 6, 2020, at noon.

The indictment and arrests were announced by John R. Lausch, Jr., United States Attorney for the Northern District of Illinois; James M. Gibbons, Special Agent-in-Charge of the Chicago office of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Homeland Security Investigations; Irene Lindow, Special Agent-in-Charge of the U.S. Department of Labor Office of Inspector General in Chicago; and Patrick S. Mills, Special Agent-in-Charge of the U.S. Department of State's Diplomatic Security Service (DSS). Substantial assistance in the investigation was provided by the Cook County Sheriff's Office, Chicago Police Department, and the Regional Security Office at the U.S. Embassy in Cotonou, Benin. The government is represented by Assistant U.S. Attorneys Barry Jonas and Tiffany Ardam.

According to the charges, Awoga coached the victims, then age 14 and 12, in Benin to lie to U.S. immigration authorities about their family relationships in order to obtain tourist visas, and then accompanied them into the United States. Once in the U.S., the defendants harbored the victims in residences in the Chicago suburbs of Country Club Hills and Hazel Crest while the victims were forced to provide labor and services for the defendants' financial gain, the indictment states.

The public is reminded that an indictment is not evidence of guilt. The defendants are presumed innocent and entitled to a fair trial at which the government has the burden of proving guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. If convicted, the Court must impose a reasonable sentence under federal statutes and the advisory U.S. Sentencing Guidelines.