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THREE DEFENDANTS PLEAD GUILTY IN “ADVANCE-FEE” FRAUD SCHEME
Fraud Victims Lose More Than \$1.2 Million

WASHINGTON – Three defendants pleaded guilty to federal charges of running an “advance-fee” scheme that targeted U.S. victims with promises of millions of dollars, including money from an estate and a lottery, Assistant Attorney General Alice S. Fisher of the Criminal Division and U.S. Attorney Benton J. Campbell of the Eastern District of New York announced today. The guilty plea proceedings were held before United States Magistrate Judge Ramon E. Reyes, Jr. at the federal courthouse in Brooklyn, New York.

The investigation was initiated by Dutch law enforcement authorities. After identifying victims in the United States, the Dutch authorities notified the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, which opened its own investigation, resulting in the charges against the defendants. Three of the defendants were arrested in Amsterdam on February 21, 2006, and were subsequently extradited to the United States. They are:

- Nnamdi Chizuba Anisiobi (a/k/a Yellowman, Abdul Rahman, Michael Anderson, Edmund Walter, Nancy White, Jiggaman, and Namu), 31, citizen of Nigeria;
- Anthony Friday Ehis (a/k/a John J. Smith, Toni N. Amokwu and Mr. T), 34, citizen of Senegal; and
- Kesandu Egwuonwu (a/k/a KeKe, Joey Martin Maxwell, David Mark, Helmut Schkinger), 35, citizen of Nigeria.

Anisiobi pled guilty to one count of conspiracy, eight counts of wire fraud, and one count of mail fraud. Ehis pled guilty to one count of conspiracy and five counts of wire fraud. Egwuonwu pled guilty to one count of conspiracy, three counts of wire fraud and one count of mail fraud. The fraud victims allegedly lost more than \$1.2 million.

A fourth defendant, also a Nigerian citizen, Lenn Nwokeafor (a/k/a Eric Williams, Lee, Chucks, and Nago), fled to Nigeria and was subsequently arrested by the Nigerian Economic & Financial Crimes Commission on July 27, 2006, pursuant to a United States arrest warrant. He is being held by the Nigerian authorities pending extradition to the United States.

According to the indictment and an earlier filed complaint, the defendants sent “spam” e-mails to thousands of potential victims, in which they falsely claimed to control millions of dollars located abroad. Attempting to conceal their identities, the defendants used a variety of aliases, phone numbers, and email addresses. In one scenario, the defendants sent emails purporting to be from an individual suffering from terminal throat cancer who needed assistance distributing approximately \$55 million to charity. In exchange for a victim’s help, the defendants offered to give a 20% commission to the victim or a charity of his or her choice. Subsequently, as part of the ruse, the defendants would send a variety of fraudulent documents, including a “Letter of Authority” or a “Certificate of Deposit,” making it appear that the promised funds were available, and pictures of an individual claiming to suffer from throat cancer. Defendant Anisiobi allegedly telephoned victims, disguising his voice to give the impression that he was suffering from throat cancer.

After obtaining their victims’ trust, the defendants asked them to wire-transfer payment for a variety of advance fees, ostensibly for legal representation, taxes, and additional documentation. In return, the victims received nothing. In a variation of the scheme, if the victims said they could not afford to pay the advance fees, the defendants would send them counterfeit checks, supposedly from a cancer patient, to cover those fees. Many victims deposited the checks and then drew on them to wire-transfer the advance fees. Subsequently, when the checks did not clear, the victims suffered substantial losses.

“Online scam artists should be on notice that we will continue to work closely with our international partners to ensure that there are no safe geographic boundaries for committing these crimes,” said Assistant Attorney General Alice S. Fisher of the Criminal Division.

“These defendants preyed upon the kindness and charity of their victims by sending thousands of scam emails aimed at their recipients’ heartstrings,” stated United States Attorney Benton J. Campbell. “If you receive an email offering you money in exchange for an advance fee, you would be well advised to delete it.”

The maximum penalty for mail and wire fraud is 20 years in prison. The conspiracy charge carries a maximum penalty of five years in prison.

The case was investigated by the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, and prosecuted by Fraud Section Trial Attorneys Mary (Kit) Dimke, Amanda Riedel, and Nicola Mrazek, Paralegal Pamela Johnson, and Assistant United States Attorney Tanya Hill.

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