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Department of Justice

U.S. Attorney's Office

Western District of Washington

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Tuesday, May 3, 2022

Nigerian citizen pleads guilty to COVID-19 unemployment fraud on Washington and 17 other states

Obtained personal identifying information of more than 20,000 Americans to submit fraudulent claims for more than \$2 million in federally funded payments since 2017

Tacoma – A 45-year-old resident of Lekki, Nigeria, pleaded guilty today in U.S. District Court in Tacoma to wire fraud and aggravated identity theft for using stolen identities to claim hundreds of thousands of dollars in pandemic-related unemployment benefits, announced U.S. Attorney Nick Brown. Abidemi Rufai has been in custody since his arrest at New York's JFK airport in May 2021. At the time of his arrest, Rufai was the Special Assistant to the Governor of Nigeria's Ogun State.

According to the plea agreement, since 2017, Rufai unlawfully obtained the personal identifying information for more than 20,000 Americans to submit more than \$2 million in claims for federally funded benefits under a variety of relief programs. The various agencies involved paid out more than \$600,000.

The largest amount of fraud was committed against the Washington State Employment Security Department, which paid out \$350,763 in fraudulent pandemic unemployment claims to accounts controlled by Rufai. Rufai also submitted fraudulent pandemic unemployment claims in at least 17 other states.

Rufai also defrauded the Small Business Administration (SBA) by attempting to obtain Economic Injury Disaster loans (EIDL) tied to the COVID-19 pandemic. Between April 8, 2020, and June 26, 2020, he submitted 19 fraudulent EIDL applications. SBA paid out \$10,000 based on the applications.

Between 2017 and 2020, Rufai attempted to obtain more than \$1.7 million in IRS tax refunds by submitting 675 false claims. The IRS paid out \$90,877 on these claims.

Rufai's efforts to enrich himself with false disaster claims did not start with COVID-19. In September and October 2017, he submitted 49 disaster relief claims connected to Hurricane Harvey and Hurricane Irma. He filed \$24,500 in false claims and was paid on 13 claims totaling \$6,500.

Rufai has agreed to pay full restitution to the defrauded agencies.

Wire fraud in relation to a presidentially declared major disaster or emergency is punishable by up to 30 years in prison. Aggravated identity theft is punishable two years in prison to follow any prison term imposed

on another charge. Prosecutors have agreed to recommend no more than 71 months in prison. The recommendation is not binding on U.S. District Judge Benjamin H. Settle, who will determine the appropriate sentence on August 15, 2022, after considering the sentencing guidelines and other statutory factors.

This case was investigated by the FBI, with assistance from the Department of Labor Office of Inspector General, Internal Revenue Service Criminal Investigations, Department of Homeland Security Office of Inspector General, and the United States Small Business Administration Office of the Inspector General. The Washington Employment Security Department is cooperating in the investigation.

The case is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorneys Seth Wilkinson and Cindy Chang of the Western District of Washington.

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>.

Topic(s):

Coronavirus
Cybercrime
Disaster Fraud
Financial Fraud
Identity Theft
Tax

Component(s):

USAO - Washington, Western

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