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Department of Justice

U.S. Attorney's Office

Western District of Texas

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Thursday, October 22, 2020

2nd Austin-Based Nigerian National Sentenced to Federal Prison for Role in Furthering a Conspiracy to Commit Money Laundering

In Austin today, a federal judge sentenced a Nigerian National residing in Austin to 51 months in federal prison for his participation in a conspiracy that laundered more than \$1.7 Million in Business Email Compromise (BEC) scam proceeds stolen from multiple companies, announced U.S. Attorney Gregg N. Sofer; Special Agent in Charge Shane Folden, Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), San Antonio; and, Inspector in Charge Adrian Gonzalez, U.S. Postal Inspection Service (USPIS), Houston Division

In addition to the prison term, U.S. District Judge Robert Pitman ordered that 33-year-old Nosa Onaghise pay \$1,639,419.57 in restitution; pay a \$230,000 money judgment; forfeit \$14,282.50 seized from a bank account; and, be placed on supervised release for a period of three years after completing his prison term.

In a BEC scheme, scammers target businesses and individuals making wire transfer payments, often targeting employees with access to company finances. The scammers trick the employees into making wire transfer payments to bank accounts thought to belong to trusted partners—except the money ends up in accounts controlled by the fraudsters. Sometimes the scammers use computer intrusion techniques to alter legitimate payment request emails, changing the recipient bank accounts. Sometimes they send spoofed emails from email addresses similar to the real email accounts used by trusted partners.

On December 12, 2018, Onaghise pleaded guilty to one count of passport fraud admitting to attempting to use a false, forged or counterfeit passport to open several bank accounts in the U.S. in 2018, in furtherance of the fraud scheme.

On December 20, 2019, Joseph Odibobhahemen, a 28-year-old Nigerian citizen formerly residing in Austin and Onaghise's co-defendant, was sentenced to 78 months in federal prison for his role in the

fraud scheme.

Court records in this indictment (A18CR358), and the indictment also returned in Austin against four other coconspirators (A19CR78), show that between November 2016 and April 2019, over \$10 million was allegedly sent by victims to accounts controlled by the conspirators, who were able to take in excess of \$6 million before law enforcement or financial institutions stopped the fraudulent transfers. Onaghise, Odibobhahemen and the others acquired or controlled dozens of bank accounts opened in the U.S., including in Austin, utilizing fraudulent identification documents, including fraudulent foreign passports in fake names. Once the funds were fraudulently procured and deposited into these bogus accounts, the defendants worked quickly to withdraw or transfer the funds.

The four additional co-conspirators—Bameyi Omale, Chinonso Agbaji, Igbo Calaba and Chibuzor Uba—have all pleaded guilty and are currently serving lengthy federal prison terms: Omale, 135 months; Agbaji, 78 months; Calaba, 30 months; and Uba, 36 months.

“Scammers and fraudsters beware! We will bring the full weight of federal law enforcement down on those who prey on the legitimate business community here in Austin and elsewhere in this district,” stated U.S. Attorney Sofer. “The sentence and restitution order handed down today demonstrate the serious nature of these offenses - offenses that damage our economy and harm innocent victims. If you are engaged in this shameful and illegal activity, you can expect to go to federal prison.”

“This federal investigation uncovered a sophisticated scheme to steal from U.S. businesses,” said HSI San Antonio Special Agent in Charge Folden. “These types of crimes cost U.S. citizens hundreds of millions of dollars each year to finance criminal organizations around the world. HSI and its law enforcement partners will continue to do everything possible to stop this kind of fraud and to protect the citizens of the United States.”

“Technological advancements have led to the sophistication of fraudulent schemes,” stated USPIS Inspector in Charge Gonzalez. “However, no matter what their scheme may be, if criminals use the U.S. Mail in furtherance of it, they will face the full investigative force of the Postal Inspection Service. Postal Inspectors will work tirelessly with our law enforcement partners, such as HSI, to ensure these fraudsters are brought to justice.”

Special agents with HSI and USPIS investigated this case. Assistant U.S. Attorneys Michael Galdo and Keith Henneke prosecuted this case on behalf of the Government.

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Topic(s):
Cyber Crime
Financial Fraud

Component(s):
USAO - Texas, Western

Updated October 22, 2020