



Department of Justice

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**THREE MORE INDICTED, TWO MORE SENTENCED
IN BATON ROUGE, LOUISIANA, ON DISASTER RELIEF FRAUD CHARGES**

BATON ROUGE, LA – Three more Louisiana residents were indicted, another was sentenced, and another pled guilty in federal court on charges of fraud related to hurricane disaster relief programs, United States Attorney David R. Dugas announced today.

JOEL J. BRANCH, age 33, of Jonesville, Louisiana, was charged yesterday in a two-count indictment by a federal grand jury with aiding and abetting the making a false and fraudulent claim for disaster assistance benefits (Count One) and with aiding and abetting illegal conversion of government property, that is, a check from the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) for expedited disaster assistance (Count Two). The charges resulted from an investigation conducted by the U.S. Postal Inspection Service. If convicted on Count One, BRANCH faces a maximum sentence of five years imprisonment, a \$250,000 fine, or both. If convicted on Count Two, BRANCH faces a maximum sentence of ten years imprisonment, a \$250,000 fine, or both.

TOMIKIA M. BLANCHARD age 27, and KENYONTIA K. HUNTER, age 28, both of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, were each charged yesterday in a two-count indictment by a federal grand jury with bank fraud (Count One) and passing a forged Treasury check of the United States (Count Two). The charges resulted from investigations conducted by the U.S. Postal Inspection Service. If convicted on Count One, BLANCHARD and HUNTER each faces a maximum sentence of thirty years imprisonment, a \$1,000,000 fine, or both. If convicted on Count Two, BLANCHARD and HUNTER each faces a maximum sentence of ten years imprisonment, a \$250,000 fine, or both.

NYOKI JOHNSON, age 27, of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, pled guilty on May 17, 2007, to Count One of an indictment charging her with making a false claim for disaster assistance benefits. JOHNSON was sentenced today by U.S. District Court Judge James J. Brady to three years of probation and \$2,000 in restitution. The U.S. Secret Service and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Office of Inspector General conducted the investigation of this matter.

Finally, TERRY WATSON, age 40, of Zachary, Louisiana, was sentenced on November 16, 2006, to two years of probation, \$2,000 in restitution, and 50 hours of community service in connection with his July 5, 2006, guilty plea to a charge of making a false claim for disaster assistance benefits. U.S. District Court Judge James J. Brady today revoked WATSON's probation for failure to comply with the terms thereof, and sentenced WATSON to a term of imprisonment of eleven months, followed by three years of supervised release. The charges

against WATSON were the result of an investigation by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Office of Inspector General.

Today's indictments bring the total number of individuals who have been charged in the Middle District of Louisiana with violations related to hurricane disaster relief funds to one hundred twenty-eight.

In September 2005, Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales created the Hurricane Katrina Fraud Task Force, designed to deter, investigate and prosecute disaster-related federal crimes such as charity fraud, identity theft, procurement fraud and insurance fraud. The Hurricane Katrina Fraud Task Force – chaired by Assistant Attorney General Alice S. Fisher of the Criminal Division – includes the FBI, the U.S. Inspectors General community, the U.S. Secret Service, the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, the Executive Office for United States Attorneys and others.

For further information, contact David R. Dugas, U.S. Attorney for the Middle District of Louisiana, or Lyman Thornton, First Assistant U.S. Attorney, at (225) 389-0443. Anyone suspecting criminal activity involving disaster assistance programs can make an anonymous report by calling the toll-free Hurricane Relief Fraud Hotline, 1-866-720-5721, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, until further notice. Information can also be emailed to the Hurricane Katrina Fraud Task Force at HKFTF@leo.gov or sent by surface mail, with as many details as possible, to Hurricane Katrina Fraud Task Force, Baton Rouge, LA 70821-4909.

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