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BODY:

A former State Department program manager in Iraq has been charged with accepting tens of thousands of dollars in kickbacks in exchange for steering contracts to Iraqi construction firms, according to court documents.

It appeared to be the first time a State Department employee had been charged in federal court in connection with fraud in the multibillion-dollar U.S. reconstruction effort in Iraq, according to officials familiar with that work.

The criminal complaint, unsealed Monday in U.S. District Court in western Texas, charged Richard Lopez Razo, 52, with illegal receipt of kickbacks and bribes and with wire fraud. He was arrested Friday in Sterling and later released on his own recognizance, court documents said.

From 2005 to July 2008, Razo worked in Iraq as a logistics specialist for three U.S. companies, according to the complaint. It alleges that during that period he requested tens of thousands of dollars in bribes from Iraqi subcontractors for lining up construction contracts. The subcontractors sent some of the money to Razo's North Carolina bank account via wire transfers, according to the allegations.

Razo began work for the State Department as a provincial program manager in Iraq in September 2008, with oversight for reconstruction projects in the south, according to the court documents. They said Razo's private e-mails indicated he solicited at least \$144,000 in kickbacks from Iraqi construction firms seeking U.S. contracts in the ensuing weeks. It was not clear from the court documents when Razo left the State Department.

A woman reached by phone at Razo's home in Fayetteville, N.C., said Tuesday he was not available.

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