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Five Found Guilty in Black Money Scam Totaling Approximately \$2.5 Million

(Alexandria, VA) – A federal jury today found Jermain Betea, a citizen of Cameroon, guilty of conspiracy to commit wire fraud, to alter U.S. securities, and to cause victims of fraud to move in interstate commerce, as well as one count of altering U.S. securities, and two counts of causing victims of fraud to move in interstate commerce. Betea was also convicted of obstruction of justice. Chuck Rosenberg, United States Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia, made the announcement after a two day trial and two hours of jury deliberation. Four other defendants: Anne Tohotcheu; Moise Tohotcheu; Joel Happy Siwe; and, Hippolyte Kokoo, also all citizens of Cameroon, were found guilty of conspiracy to commit wire fraud, to alter U.S. securities, and to cause victims of fraud to move in interstate commerce, as well as one count of altering U.S. securities, and two counts of causing victims of fraud to move in interstate commerce on February 9, 2007, following four days of trial. That jury was unable to reach a verdict as to Betea, and he was retried.

The charges arose from a scheme, which began in April 2003, and lasted through at least October of 2005, and which targeted victims in Connecticut, New Mexico, Virginia, Florida, Maryland, Washington, D.C., and Oklahoma, and involved a loss of approximately \$2.5 million.

This case began as a kidnapping investigation in which the "victims" were deceived into flying to West Palm Beach, Florida. Only later did law enforcement officers learn that one of the kidnapers had been scammed by the kidnapping "victims" out of \$125,000, and that the intention of the "victims" was to scam another of the kidnapers out of a further \$250,000. When interviewed by law enforcement officers after the kidnapping, Betea lied to them about his reasons for traveling to Florida and about his knowledge of the black money scam. When the investigation of the "victims'" involvement in the black money scam got underway, investigators discovered a ring of Cameroonian scammers operating nation-wide, which led to charges being brought against seven defendants, five of whom have now been convicted. The other two are fugitives. All five of the kidnapers were convicted as well.

The scheme is called a "Black Money Scam" because in a typical variation, the scammer demonstrates how two legitimate \$100 bills can be produced from one such bill provided by the victim. The victim's \$100 bill is placed between two pieces of identically sized white paper that

have been imprinted on a copier with images of \$100 bills that fluoresce under a black light. The two pieces of white paper and the victim's \$100 bill are then covered with a mixture of iodine and starch, which turns the paper and currency black, placed in an envelope, and the victim is asked to step on it. After a few minutes the scammer opens the envelope, "washes" the bills in a solution that dissolves the coloring, and hands to the victim his original \$100 bill and two other legitimate \$100 bills. In reality, at some point in the demonstration, the scammer substitutes for the treated white paper, two of his own \$100 bills that have been colored black.

According to the scammer, the white paper bills, which he supposedly obtained from Switzerland or a similar source, are actually legitimate \$100 bills in all respects but for the absence of ink. The "chemical" is used to transfer some of the ink from the victim's \$100 bill to the white bills, thus producing legitimate currency.

Having demonstrated how the victim can double his money, the scammer induces the victim to provide a large amount of currency that is similarly processed and supposedly wrapped in aluminum foil. However, because of the volume of currency and paper, the scammer tells the victim that the process will take several hours to convert all the paper into legitimate currency. The scammer then departs promising to return later when the process is complete. He leaves the wrapped bundle with the victim as security. When the scammer fails to return, and the victim unwraps the bundle, he finds only black construction paper cut to the size of U.S. currency.

Kokoo is to be sentenced on May 11, 2007, by United States District Judge Claude M. Hilton. Moise Tohotcheu, Anne Tohotcheu, and Siwe will be sentenced on May 18, 2007, and Betea on July 27, 2007, also by United States District Judge Hilton. Each faces a maximum of 20 years in prison.

The United States Secret Service and police departments in Montgomery County, Maryland; Hamden, Connecticut; Santa Fe, New Mexico; West Palm Beach, Florida; and, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, investigated the case. The case is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorneys Michael E. Rich and James P. Gillis.

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