

NEWS

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Togolese Man Admits Conspiring with His Wife and Others in Forced Labor of Young West African Women

(More)

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NEWARK – A Togolese man pleaded guilty today in connection with the forced labor of dozens of young West African females working in hair braiding salons in Newark and East Orange, Acting U.S. Attorney Ralph J. Marra, Jr. announced.

Lassissi Afolabi, 46, who was residing in East Orange, pleaded guilty before U.S. District Judge Jose L. Linares to one count of conspiring with other individuals, including his former wife, to commit forced labor, trafficking with respect to forced labor, and holding their visas and identification; one count of forced labor with aggravated sexual abuse; and one count of traveling with intent to engage in illicit sexual conduct with a minor.

Afolabi has been held without bail since his arrest on Sept. 6, 2007. Judge Linares continued the defendant's detention and scheduled sentencing for Dec 8.

"These young women were forced to work for nothing to satisfy the greedy motives of the defendants," said Marra. "The dignity and basic human rights of the victims clearly meant nothing to this defendant or his co-conspirators."

"ICE Special Agents, working with the U.S. Department of Labor, and other law enforcement partners, will not tolerate anyone who exploits or victimizes innocent people looking for a better life in the United States," said Peter T. Edge, Special Agent in Charge of the ICE Office of Investigations in Newark. "ICE is committed to identifying, dismantling, and disrupting the international criminal organizations that are involved in any form of involuntary servitude."

At his plea hearing, Afolabi admitted that from October 2002 through September 2007, he engaged in a conspiracy to obtain the forced labor of a number of women whom his wife, Akouavi Kpade Afolabi, had brought over from Togo with fraudulent visas. Once the young women entered the United States, Afolabi and his wife required them to work at hair braiding salons for up to fourteen hours per day, six or seven days a week. The women were also required to turn over all of their earnings, including their tips, to the defendants. The defendants did not allow the young women to keep their passports or identification; to speak with their families outside of the defendants' presence; or to make any outside friends. The women were rarely permitted to leave Afolabi's residence other than to work. When a girl broke a rule she was punished, often physically by Afolabi or his wife. Afolabi also admitted to forcing at least one girl to have sex with him during the course of the conspiracy and to taking one girl, who was under the age of 18, from New Jersey to North Carolina for the purpose of engaging in sex with her.

The trial of the remaining defendant, Akouavi Kpade Afolabi, is scheduled to commence on Sept. 14, 2009.

The forced labor charge carries a statutory maximum penalty of life in prison. The charge of traveling with intent to engage in illicit sexual conduct with a minor carries a

maximum penalty of 30 years in prison. The conspiracy count carries a maximum penalty of 5 years in prison. Additionally, Afolabi faces a maximum fine of \$250,000 or twice the aggregate loss to the victims or gain to the defendant, and mandatory restitution to the victims.

In determining an actual sentence, Judge Linares will consult the advisory U.S. Sentencing Guidelines, which provide appropriate sentencing ranges that take into account the severity and characteristics of the offense, the defendant's criminal history, if any, and other factors. The judge, however, is not bound by those guidelines in determining a sentence.

Parole has been abolished in the federal system. Defendants who are given custodial terms must serve nearly all that time.

Marra credited Special Agents of Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Newark Division, under the direction of Special Agent in Charge Peter T. Edge, as well as agents of the Department of Labor, Customs and Border Protection, and the U.S. Department of State.

The government is represented by Assistant U.S. Attorneys Shana W. Chen and Nancy Hoppock of the Criminal Division in Newark.

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Defense Attorney: John P. McGovern, Esq., Newark.