

NEWS

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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East Orange Woman Convicted on All 22 Counts
in Forced Labor Case Involving Young West African Women

(More)

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NEWARK – A jury today convicted an East Orange woman of all 22 counts against her in connection with the forced labor of more than 20 young West African females working in hair braiding salons in Newark and East Orange, U.S. Attorney Paul J. Fishman announced.

The jury convicted Akouavi Kpade Afolabi, best known as “Sister,” but also known as “Gloria Lawson,” and “Celine,” after four hours of deliberations, following a four-week trial. The jury also found that more than \$25,000 in cash recovered from the defendant’s residence on the day of her arrest was the proceeds of the defendant’s crimes. Those funds will be forfeited.

U.S. District Judge Jose L. Linares scheduled sentencing for Jan. 21.

Many of the counts of conviction carry statutory maximum sentences of 20 years in prison. Under the advisory U.S. Sentencing Guidelines, which a sentencing judge must consult in determining a sentence, Afolabi faces a range of between 151 and 188 months for the convictions. However, numerous other sentencing enhancements, which the government will argue apply, could increase the guidelines range to up to life in prison. The Sentencing Guidelines are advisory only, and Judge Linares will have discretion in imposing a sentence within or outside of the determined guidelines range.

Afolabi, 55, a legal permanent U.S. resident from Togo, was convicted of one count of conspiracy to commit visa fraud; five counts of visa fraud; four counts of smuggling illegal aliens for financial gain; one count of conspiracy to commit forced labor, trafficking with respect to forced labor and document servitude; five counts of forced labor; five counts of trafficking with respect to forced labor; and one count of conspiracy to harbor illegal aliens for financial gain.

“The evidence presented at trial revealed that these young women – some as young as 10 years old – endured unconscionable indignities,” said Fishman. “The defendant ruled over her victims with threats, violence, even voodoo curses. We will seek an appropriately long sentence that reflects the seriousness of Afolabi’s conduct.”

“ICE aggressively targets criminals who exploit or victimize vulnerable individuals who are looking for a better life in the United States,” said Peter T. Edge, Special Agent in Charge of ICE’s Office of Investigations in Newark. “We are committed to identifying, dismantling and disrupting the international criminal organizations that are involved in any form of involuntary servitude.”

The case was tried by Assistant U.S. Attorneys Shana W. Chen and Nancy Hoppock of the U.S. Attorney’s Office Criminal Division in Newark. The case was investigated by Special Agents of Immigration and Customs Enforcement in Newark, who also provided

trial assistance.

Testimony revealed that Afolabi committed forced labor involving more than 20 girls, ranging from 10 to 19 years old, from Togo and Ghana. Testimony from victims revealed that Afolabi and others involved – including her husband, Lassissi, who previously pleaded guilty – recruited the girls from impoverished West African villages, and got them into the United States with fraudulently obtained visas.

Once in the United States, Afolabi and her husband required them to work at hair-braiding salons for up to 14 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.

Testimony at trial from one victim, now 18 years old, revealed that all pay, including tips were collected by Afolabi – even a 50-cent tip in one instance. To maintain the girls' obedience, they were frequently threatened with voodoo curses, were physically beaten and psychologically abused.

Evidence also revealed that more than \$500,000 in cash deposits were made in bank accounts of the defendant's husband. The husband, testifying as part of her defense case, admitted during cross-examination that the girls surrendered, on average, more than \$7,400 of their earnings each month to the Afolabis.

Fishman credited Special Agents of the ICE, particularly Special Agent Ronald C. Conyers and Joseph D. Salavarria, under the direction of Special Agent in Peter T. Edge in Newark, with the investigation leading to today's conviction.

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Defense Attorney: Bukie Adetula, Esq.