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ELEVEN PLEAD GUILTY IN MARRIAGE FRAUD SCHEME

Individuals entered into sham marriages to gain citizenship

COLUMBUS –Hasan Salohutdinov, 28, of Dublin, Ohio and a citizen of Uzbekistan, pleaded guilty in United States District Court here today to one count of conspiracy to commit marriage fraud and present false statements to U.S. immigration authorities for his role in a scheme to arrange sham marriages between U.S. citizens and foreign nationals, primarily Eastern Europeans, in order to evade immigration laws. Elbek Saidjanov of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, also a citizen of Uzbekistan, entered a plea of guilty today for having traveled to Columbus in order to enter into a sham marriage in February 2009.

Salohutdinov and Saidjanov are the last of eleven people indicted and arrested in December 2009 to enter guilty pleas.

Carter M. Stewart, United States Attorney for the Southern District of Ohio, and Brian Moskowitz, Special Agent in Charge, ICE Office of Investigations in Ohio and Michigan, announced the pleas today.

The following individuals entered guilty pleas on March 24, 2010 and are awaiting sentencing:

- Dimitry Pani, 28, Dublin, conspiracy
- Sviatlana A. Piskunova, 22, Columbus, conspiracy
- Laura Elizabeth Grace Scott, 20, Columbus, conspiracy
- Courtnie Susann Good, 20, Columbus, marriage fraud
- Sobithon A. Mirzaev, 22, New Orleans, Louisiana, marriage fraud
- Ladawna Sharee Tackett, 20, West Jefferson, marriage fraud
- Iskander Odilovich Tairov, 20, Galloway, marriage fraud
- Brent James Woods, 25, Columbus, marriage fraud
- Djafar B. Sobirov, 29, Columbus, marriage fraud

Pani, Salohutdinov, Piskunova, Saidjanov and Mirzaev were ordered detained pending sentencing because they are foreign nationals illegally present in the United States.

According to a statement read in court by the lead ICE investigating agent, Pani and an unindicted co-conspirator established an informal “business” to find U.S. citizens who would accept money to enter into sham marriages with aliens for the purpose of evading a provision of the immigration laws of the United States, and to aid and abet in the making of false statements to immigration authorities with respect to those sham marriages in an effort to convince the immigration authorities that they were genuine marriages.

Salohutdinov, who had entered into a sham marriage in Illinois, moved to Ohio and came to know Pani. Salohutdinov and Piskunova joined the conspiracy with Pani and arranged sham marriages for certain other aliens known to Salohutdinov.

Typically the sham marriages occurred shortly after the alien and the U.S. citizen met each other, sometimes on the same day. Saidjanov, an alien, came to Columbus from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and paid Pani to arrange a sham marriage on February 9, 2009 with Good. Saidjanov also paid for his girlfriend, who is an alien, too, to enter into a sham marriage on the following day. These sham marriages took place at The Columbus Wedding Chapel, 761 South High Street in Columbus, Ohio. After the marriages, Saidjanov and his girlfriend returned to Philadelphia, and did not live with their new American spouses.

“The foreign nationals were promised legal residency in return for marrying U.S. citizens,” Stewart said, “and the citizens were promised monetary compensation.”

Each count is punishable by up to five years imprisonment, a fine of up to \$250,000 and three years of supervised release. Foreign nationals also face deportation after any prison time served.

“Marriage fraud schemes corrupt the integrity and fairness of our nation's immigration system,” said Brian Moskowitz, Special Agent in Charge of the ICE Office of Investigations in Michigan and Ohio. “Not only are our overall security efforts hampered by the frequent use of fraudulent documents but this illicit activity also serves to reward those who flout our laws with a path to citizenship. Neither is acceptable.”

Stewart commended the investigation by ICE agents, and the assistance of the ICE Office of Detention and Removal, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, and the Columbus Police Department.

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