

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
EASTERN DISTRICT OF LOUISIANA

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*

CRIMINAL NO: 19-183

v.

*

SECTION: "H"

SONOVAH JUDITH HILLMAN

*

* * *

FACTUAL BASIS

The defendant, **SONOVAH JUDITH HILLMAN**, (hereinafter, "defendant" or "**HILLMAN**"), has agreed to plead guilty to Count One of the Indictment now pending against her, charging **HILLMAN** with violating Title 18, United States Code, Section 1349, by conspiring to violate Title 18, United States Code, Section 1343. Both the Government and the defendant, **SONOVAH JUDITH HILLMAN**, do hereby stipulate and agree that the following facts set forth a sufficient factual basis for the crimes to which the defendant is pleading guilty. The Government and the defendant further stipulate that the Government would have proven, through the introduction of competent testimony and admissible, tangible exhibits, the following facts, beyond a reasonable doubt, to support the allegations in the Indictment now pending against **HILLMAN**:

Background

Agents with the United States Coast Guard – Coast Guard Investigative Service ("CGIS") and United States Department of Homeland Security – Homeland Security Investigations ("HSI")

would testify, and records from the California Secretary of State would be admitted to establish, that **HILLMAN** was a resident of Hercules, California.

Documents in the custody of both Victim A and the State of Louisiana would be admitted to establish that Victim A was a floating crane and stevedore company headquartered in Convent, Louisiana, within the Eastern District of Louisiana. Victim A provided transportation and stevedoring services on and along the lower Mississippi River.

Documents in the custody of both Victim B and the State of Texas would be admitted to establish that Victim B was a marine shipping company that specialized in international cargo transportation whose national headquarters was located in Houston, Texas.

Representatives of Bank of America, N.A. ("Bank of America") would establish that Bank of America was a financial institution, the deposits of which were insured by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation.

Records from Bank of America would be introduced to establish that Victim B maintained multiple bank accounts, including a checking account at Bank of America. Additionally, **HILLMAN** controlled a bank account at Bank of America bearing account number XXXXX6451 ("**HILLMAN's** account"). **HILLMAN's** account was listed in the name of "SONOVAH JUDITH HILLMAN SOLE PROP, DBA HILLMAN PROMOTIONS."

Business records maintained by Victim A would be introduced to establish that Victim A maintained and operated email accounts for its employees with the following format: [name]@[VictimA].com.

Becoming a Money Mule

Special Agents with CGIS and HSI would testify as to the role money mules play in a scheme to defraud unsuspecting individuals via the Internet. Specifically, when unknown individuals obtain access without authorization to the email accounts of individuals located in the United States ("victims"), often through a malicious computer program designed to steal computer access data, such as user names and passwords, for, among other things, bank accounts, email accounts, and social networking websites. After the individuals gain access to the account information, they caused money to be transferred out of the victims' bank accounts via fraudulent wire transfers to the bank accounts of "money mules" or "mules" within the United States.

Once the wire transfers were received into a mule's bank account(s), the mule was directed to withdraw the fraudulently-acquired funds quickly, before the fraud could be detected by the victims or the banks. The mule kept a portion of the fraudulent proceeds and distributed the remaining funds to other members of the conspiracy.

Testimony by Special Agents with CGIS and HSI would establish that **HILLMAN**, in the role of a money mule, was recruited by co-conspirators known and unknown to receive fraudulent wire transfers from the bank accounts of victims. Thereafter, **HILLMAN** was directed to withdraw money from the account, keep a small portion for herself, and wire the remainder to various individuals and locations throughout the United States as directed by her co-conspirators.

Defrauding Victim A and Victim B

Documentary evidence, as well as the testimony of Special Agents of CGIS and HSI would be introduced to show that known and unknown co-conspirators of **HILLMAN** obtained, without

authorization, access into the email account of an employee of Victim A who worked in Victim A's accounting department ("Employee 1") on about April 12, 2017 via a phishing scam.¹ To accomplish the phishing scam, one of **HILLMAN**'s co-conspirators caused the transmission of a wire signal in interstate and foreign commerce, specifically from outside the State of Louisiana, to Victim A's headquarters in Convent, Louisiana.

The Government would further establish through the testimony of representatives of Victim A and documentary evidence that after obtaining access to Employee 1's email account, known and unknown co-conspirators of **HILLMAN** arranged to have emails sent to and from Employee 1 forwarded automatically to an email account under their control. Consequently, **HILLMAN**'s co-conspirators were able to gain access to invoices sent between Victim A and its customers.

The Government would further establish that, after gaining access to Employee 1's email account, **HILLMAN** and her co-conspirators engaged in a "business email compromise" ("BEC") scheme. A BEC is accomplished by "spoofing" legitimate business email accounts, often through social engineering or computer intrusion techniques. Perpetrators then use the email access to cause the target company, or individuals involved in legitimate business transactions with the target company, to conduct unauthorized transfers of funds to money mules' bank accounts. In this case, known and unknown co-conspirators of **HILLMAN** then registered a domain name similar to Victim A's domain (for example, "Victimn A" instead of "Victimm A") and, pretending to

¹ "Phishing" is the fraudulent attempt to obtain sensitive information such as usernames, passwords, and credit card details by disguising as a trustworthy entity in an electronic communication.

be representatives of Victim A, sent emails to Victim A's customers. The emails stated that there had been an audit of Victim A's bank accounts and that Victim A's customers should remit funds owed to Victim A to a new bank account.

The Government would further establish that on about May 10, 2017, **HILLMAN's** co-conspirators contacted one of Victim A's customers, Victim B, via email as part of the above-described scam. Representatives of Victim A would testify that, in fact, it was not an employee of Victim A who sent the email, but rather an individual pretending to be a representative of Victim A. On about May 11, 2017, an email falsely purporting to be from Victim A directed Victim B to remit the amount of the funds owed to Victim A, approximately \$92,0007.85, to Bank of America account number XXXXX6451, which was controlled by **HILLMAN**.

The Government would further establish through the introduction of Bank of America records that in accordance with the directions sent via email on May 11, 2017, Victim B transferred approximately \$92,007.85 via wire signal from its bank account to **HILLMAN's** Bank of America account on about May 15, 2017. The transaction, caused by one of **HILLMAN's** co-conspirators, caused a wire signal to travel in interstate commerce, namely from the State of Texas to the State of California. Victim B believed that it was paying, and intended to pay, Victim A, by causing the funds to transfer.

Documentary evidence, including Bank of America records and telephone records reflecting dozens of calls between **HILLMAN** and at least one of her co-conspirators, would be admitted to show that on about May 15, 2017, **HILLMAN** learned that approximately \$92,007.85 had been deposited into her Bank of America account from Victim B. Once the money was

deposited into **HILLMAN'S** Bank of America account, **HILLMAN** made the following transactions, among others:

Date	Amount	Transaction
5/15/17	\$2,500.00	Transfer to Bank of America account XXXXX0340
5/16/17	\$10,000.00	Cash withdrawal
5/16/17	\$10,000.00	Two cash withdrawals
5/16/17	\$33,125.25	Wire transfer to Delta Community Credit Union (Atlanta, GA) account number XXXXXX6548
5/17/17	\$2,600.00	Transfer to Bank of America account XXXXX0340
5/17/17	\$21,000.00	Cash withdrawal
5/19/17	\$651.78	Debit card purchase of two airplane tickets for HILLMAN and her daughter to fly aboard Spirit Airlines from Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas, to Oakland, California.
5/19/17	\$335.58	Debit card purchase of two airplane tickets for HILLMAN and her daughter to fly aboard Spirit Airlines from Oakland, California, to Chicago, Illinois.
5/22/17	\$26.45	Cash withdrawal


HILLMAN's account began the month of May 2017 with a negative balance. During the month of May 2017, **HILLMAN's** account received deposits and credits totaling approximately \$93,645.85 and had withdrawals and other debits totaling approximately \$93,315.43.

The above facts come from an investigation conducted by, and would be proven at trial by credible testimony from, Special Agents from the United States Coast Guard – Coast Guard Investigative Service and United States Department of Homeland Security – Homeland Security

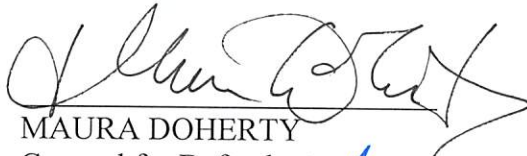
Investigations, as well as employees of Bank of America, representatives of Victim A and Victim B, business records from Bank of America, and documents and tangible exhibits in the custody of the United States Coast Guard – Coast Guard Investigative Service.

Limited Nature of Factual Basis

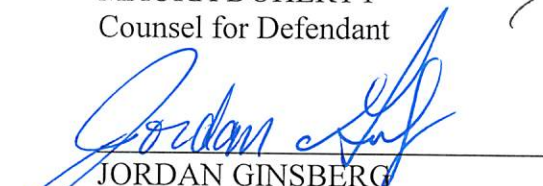
This proffer of evidence is not intended to constitute a complete statement of all facts known by **SONOVAH J. HILLMAN** and/or the Government. Rather, it is a minimum statement of facts intended to prove the necessary factual predicate for her guilty plea. The limited purpose of this proffer is to demonstrate that there exists a sufficient legal basis for the plea of guilty to the charged offenses by **SONOVAH J. HILLMAN**.


SONOVAH JUDITH HILLMAN
Defendant

2 / 13 / 2020
DATE


MAURA DOHERTY
Counsel for Defendant

2-13-20
DATE


JORDAN GINSBERG
Assistant United States Attorney

2-12-20
DATE