

Former New Bedford Man pleads guilty to wire fraud, money laundering from “Romance Scam”

“Defendant previously extradited from the United Kingdom to face charges.

BOSTON – A former New Bedford man pleaded guilty today to wire fraud and money laundering charges involving funds obtained from “romance scam” victims.

Chukwunonso “Douglas” Umegbo, a/k/a James Abbott, a/k/a Michael Philips, a/k/a Richard Armani, 38, pleaded guilty to six counts of making a false statement to a bank, two counts of wire fraud and one count of money laundering. U.S. Senior District Court Judge George A. O’Toole Jr. scheduled sentencing for April 4, 2024. Umegbo was arrested in London in April 2022 and extradited to the United States in February 2023. He has remained in federal custody since. Umegbo was indicted by a federal grand jury in February 2021.

Between no later than 2018 through at least 2019, Umegbo opened bank accounts in the greater Boston area using fake identity documents. The bank accounts were used to receive fraudulently obtained funds from a number of victims of romance scams, in which perpetrators create fictitious online personas to develop online romantic relationships with individuals in the U.S., and then leverage those relationships to obtain money and/or property. Once the fraudulently obtained funds reached the accounts controlled by Umegbo, Umegbo withdrew the money in cash, used the funds to purchase cashier’s checks, or spent the money on personal purchases. Altogether, the fraudulent accounts received more than

\$560,000.

The charge of making a false statement to a bank provides for a sentence of up to 30 years in prison, five years of supervised release and a fine of \$1 million. The charge of wire fraud provides for a sentence of up to 20 years in prison, three years of supervised release and a fine of \$250,000, or twice the gross gain or loss from the scheme, whichever is greater. The charge of money laundering provides for a sentence of up to 20 years in prison, three years of supervised release and a fine of \$500,000, or twice the value of the criminally derived property. Sentences are imposed by a federal district court judge based upon the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and statutes which govern the determination of a sentence in a criminal case.

Acting United States Attorney Joshua S. Levy; Jodi Cohen, Special Agent in Charge of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Boston Division; Ketty Larco-Ward, Inspector in Charge of the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, Boston Division; and Michael J. Krol, Special Agent in Charge of Homeland Security Investigations in New England made the announcement today. The Justice Department's Office of International Affairs provided valuable assistance in securing the arrest and extradition from the U.K. of Umegbo. Assistant U.S. Attorneys Kristen A. Kearney and Leslie A. Wright of the Securities, Financial & Cyber Fraud Unit are prosecuting the case." -Massachusetts Department of Justice.