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## News Releases



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### Indian national pleads guilty in false work visa scheme

CHARLOTTE, N.C. – An Indian national pleaded guilty Wednesday for his role in a conspiracy to violate U.S. laws by filing fraudulent immigration documents and related offenses following an investigation by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI).

Phani Raju Bhima Raju, 41, of Charlotte, pleaded guilty to five federal charges ranging from conspiracy to violate U.S. laws to money laundering conspiracy for his participation in a fraudulent scheme to obtain false H-1B immigration visas for foreign workers. The H-1B visa program allows U.S. employers to temporarily employ foreign workers in designated specialty occupations.

According to filed court documents, beginning in 2006 and through November 2012, Raju executed a fraudulent scheme to defraud the United States by submitting materially false documents to obtain H-1B immigration visas for foreign nationals seeking employment in the U.S. Raju was the president of iFuturistics, a Delaware company with headquarters in Pineville, N.C. Court records show that Raju and others falsely represented to the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) and the Department of Homeland Security's U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) that iFuturistics was hiring H-1B visa holders to work directly for the company. Contrary to the statements made on DOL and USCIS forms submitted by iFuturistics, when the applicants were granted H-1B visas they were placed in work locations with various companies throughout the U.S. In fact, as court records show, iFuturistics had entered into lucrative contracts with staffing agencies prior to submitting the fraudulent forms claiming the skilled IT workers would be employed at iFuturistics' headquarters in Pineville. Court documents show that as a result of Raju's illegal visa scheme iFuturistics received \$13.2 million as payment from staffing companies in the U.S.

As part of his plea agreement, Raju has admitted that he submitted false documentation to DOL and USCIS and that he made materially false statements on the relevant forms in order to obtain approval of the H-1B immigration visas. In addition to filing fraudulent paperwork, Raju and others engaged in an illegal scheme to recruit, solicit, entice and hire individuals outside the U.S. to apply for H-1B visas and to obtain work in the U.S. Court records show that Raju gave the H-1B visa applicants a "cheat sheet" of questions and answers to assist them during their interview process to obtain the H-1B visas.

Court records indicate that Raju and his co-conspirators at times failed to find employment for the H-1B visa workers the company had recruited to work in the U.S. On those occasions, court records indicate, these workers were "benched" in the U.S. while waiting for another job assignment. While they were benched, and contrary to the salary claims made in the application forms, these workers received little or no pay from iFuturistics. On one occasion, court documents show, a foreign national H-1B visa holder had paid \$2,500 to iFuturistics as a security deposit for processing her H-1B visa. According to the contract between iFuturistics and the employee, the employee was promised an annual salary of \$60,000 and had agreed to the company's request to market her services for employment throughout the U.S. In the end, iFuturistics never provided the worker with any work assignments and failed to pay her any wages.

Filed documents also indicate that in November 2009, Raju and others attempted to hide their fraudulent activities from law enforcement and immigration agents during a scheduled inspection visit of the company's Pineville offices. In anticipation of the visit, Raju and others had set up work stations, moved in furniture and recruited several persons to pretend to be iFuturistics workers for the duration of the inspection visit, when, in fact, the office space prior to the site visit had been empty and unoccupied. When law enforcement and immigration agents returned to the company's offices a month after the site visit, the office space was dark and unoccupied, as it had been prior to the planned inspection.

Raju was charged with and pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to violate United States laws, which carries a maximum prison term of five years and a \$250,000 fine; one count of presenting fraudulent immigration documents, which carries a maximum prison term of 10 years and a \$250,000 fine; one count of hiring at least 10 unauthorized aliens within a one year period, which carries a maximum prison term of five years and a \$250,000 fine; one count of hiring recruiting, and referring for a fee for employment an unauthorized alien, which carries a maximum prison term of six months and a \$100,000 fine; and one count of money laundering conspiracy, which carries a maximum term of 20 years in prison and a fine not to exceed the value of the funds involved. In addition, Raju has agreed to pay restitution to any victims harmed by his fraudulent conduct. The final restitution amount will be determined by the court.

Raju has been in federal custody since December 2012. A sentencing date has not been set.

The investigation was handled by HSI and DOL. The prosecution is being handled by Assistant U.S. Attorney Kenneth Smith of the U.S. Attorney's Office in Charlotte.

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