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News Releases

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Nigerian woman convicted by jury for trafficking 2 young women and forcing them to work for her as nannies

ATLANTA - Bidemi Bello, 41, a former resident of Suwanee, Ga., and a citizen of Nigeria, was convicted on eight counts by a federal jury late Friday night on charges of two counts of forced labor, two counts of trafficking for forced labor, one count of document servitude, one count of alien harboring, and two counts of making false statements in an application to become a United States citizen. The trial lasted one week.

The case was investigated by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the U.S. State Department's Diplomatic Security Services.

The jury heard from two victims who had been separately recruited in Nigeria by Bello's offer to come to the United States to work as her nanny. In return, Bello promised she would send the young women to school in the United States, and for one victim, she promised to pay her as well. The first victim, identified in court as "Laome," traveled with Bello in October of 2001 when she was 17 years old, using a fraudulent British passport the defendant had obtained for her. The second victim, identified in court as "Dupe," traveled with an associate of Bello's to the United States in November of 2004 when she was 20, also using a fraudulent British passport.

Once in the United States, Bello became verbally and physically abusive to both young women. She beat them for not cleaning well, beat them for not responding fast enough to her crying child fast enough, and beat them if they talked back to her. The young women testified Bello beat them with a large wooden spoon, shoes, electric cords and with her hands. One young woman was able to take pictures on her injuries with a disposable camera and in the pictures the jury saw her cut and bloodied lip from when Bello hit her while wearing rings.

Two witnesses, one a friend and one a relative of Bello, also testified about the abuse they witnessed. One woman described seeing "Laome" with bruises and swollen eyes from defendant's abuse. Both women counseled Bello to stop abusing the girls. One of the women testified she told Bello about a criminal prosecution in Maryland of a couple for "modern day slavery." Bello refused to stop her abuse and send the young women home, telling her friend, "I will not live in fear." This friend helped the first victim, "Laome," escape from Bello by hiding her in the back of another woman's car, who covered her with blankets, and drove her away. Bello then traveled back to Nigeria for the second victim, "Dupe."

"Few crimes are more shocking than the trafficking of human beings in this country. No one should have to live in a world of isolation and forced servitude. Together with our federal, state and local partners, ICE HSI is committed to protecting those who cannot protect themselves," said Brock Nicholson, special agent in charge of ICE HSI in Atlanta.

U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Georgia Sally Quillian Yates said of the case, "The evidence showed that this was a case of modern day slavery hidden within an expensive home in an upscale neighborhood. The two women who were abused

here thought they were going to be nannies; instead they were treated inhumanely. The laws of the United States protect all victims from such abuse, regardless of where they came from or how they came to be in the United States."

The evidence at trial showed that even though Bello's upscale home had multiple bedrooms and bathrooms, Bello made the young women sleep on the floor or a couch, would not let them use the shower, but instead required them to bathe with the water in one bucket. Even though the young women cooked all of Bwlllo's meals, they were not allowed to eat the food they cooked, as Bello made them eat cheaper food or, sometimes, food that had spoiled and was moldy. "Laome" testified that she often threw up from the food Bello made her eat, and that at on at least one occasion, Bello made her eat that vomit.

In Washington, D.C., Thomas E. Perez, Assistant Attorney General for the Civil Rights Division, said, "The defendant both physically abused and psychologically intimidated these women for her own personal gain. The Department of Justice will continue to vigorously prosecute individuals who force persons to do work against their will."

The evidence also showed that the victims were sleep deprived, and forced to be on call for Bello's child all night. The women were given ceaseless tasks such as mopping the floor with rags, washing a privacy fence in Bello's backyard, cutting the grass with a tool called a cutlass, described as a long knife blade with a wooden handle, and washing the clothes and linens by hand in a bucket. Bello would not let the young women use modern appliances such as the washing machine, dishwasher, or the lawn mower. The evidence showed that Bello never sent the young women to school as she had promised and never gave them any money for their years of work. Bello made the young women totally dependent on her for all their basic necessities and would not let them interact with anyone without Bello being present. "Dupe" finally saved up \$60, given to her by friends of Bello, and called a cab. She was assisted by pastors at a church in Marietta after taking the cab to the church.

Brian D. Lamkin, special agent in charge, FBI Atlanta Field Office, said, "The FBI worked very hard to not only apprehend Ms. Bello, who had previously fled the U.S., but to provide the much needed assistance to the victims, one of whom hadn't seen her parents in ten years. The close coordination with the many law enforcement agencies and the U.S. Attorney's Office in bringing Ms. Bello to justice is a testament to those agents that work these difficult and emotionally exhausting human trafficking cases."

Bello moved out of the United States during the investigation. She was indicted on the charges in September, 2010. She was found and arrested at Bush Intercontinental Airport in Houston upon re-entering the United States.

Sentencing for Bello has been set for Aug. 24, 2011, before U.S. District Judge William S. Duffey, Jr.

The two forced labor charges and the two labor trafficking charges carry a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison and a fine of up to \$250,000. The two document servitude counts carry a maximum sentence of five years in prison and a fine of up to \$250,000. Lastly, the alien harboring count carries a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison and a fine of up to \$250,000.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Susan Coppedge and Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, Criminal Section Deputy Chief Karima Maloney are prosecuting the case.

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