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News Releases

JUNE 13, 2011 SANTA ANA, CA

Pastor sentenced to 1 year for visa fraud, ordered to forfeit building housing former religious school

SANTA ANA, Calif. - A federal judge here Monday sentenced a Korea-born pastor who operated a now defunct Orange County religious university to one year in prison and ordered him to forfeit to the government the \$4 million property housing the school following his conviction on visa fraud and money laundering charges.

Samuel Chai Cho Oh, 66, who owned and operated California Union University (CUU) in Fullerton, Calif., pleaded guilty Jan. 13 to 10 counts of visa fraud and two counts of money laundering. In addition to one year in prison, U.S. District Judge James V. Selna also sentenced Oh to one year of home confinement. As part of his plea, Oh also agreed to forfeit another \$418,000 in proceeds from the visa fraud scheme that had been laundered through a church he was affiliated with and a Chinese restaurant owned by a friend.



The case stems from an investigation by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) with substantial assistance provided by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services and the Department of State's Diplomatic Security Service.

"The court order requiring Mr. Oh to turn over nearly \$4.5 million worth of property and assets to the government makes this one of the largest forfeiture actions ever imposed in the Los Angeles area in a visa fraud case," said Claude Arnold, special agent in charge for ICE Homeland Security Investigations in Los Angeles. "Today's sentencing should serve as a warning to those who manipulate our legal immigration system to enrich themselves - if you're caught, you stand not only to lose your freedom, but also any profits you reaped from those crimes."

HSI agents say CUU served as a front for an elaborate student visa fraud scheme, with Oh handing out phony diplomas and staging actual graduation ceremonies. According to case affidavits, a confidential source familiar with Oh's business dealings said the pastor collected \$40,000 to \$50,000 a month in fees from foreign "students" who received Form I-20s from CUU certifying their eligibility for academic study. The Form I-20 enables prospective students to go to a U.S. Embassy or consulate abroad and apply for a student visa. Until October 2009, when its federal certification was revoked, CUU was authorized by the Department of Homeland Security to accept foreign students pursuing an education in religious and biblical studies, English as a Second Language (ESL) and Oriental medicine.

"Our fraud detection officers work collaboratively with ICE HSI to investigate fraudulent conduct that jeopardizes the integrity of our immigration system," said Jane Arellano, district director for USCIS in Los Angeles. "This case is a great example of the success our collaboration can achieve."

During the investigation, which began in April 2009, ICE agents arrested and questioned more than 30 foreign nationals who stated they paid Oh fees of up to \$10,000 for documentation enabling them to fraudulently obtain student visas and, in some cases, bogus degrees. The "students" admitted they never attended class, nor did they ever see any teachers or students on the CUU campus.

In October 2009, ICE agents executed a search warrant at the school, seizing computers and more than 300 student files. A review of that evidence showed that while the majority of CUU's enrollees were Korean, the school's student body included foreign nationals from more than 20 countries.

When ICE agents and a compliance team from the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) paid an unannounced visit to the CUU campus in March 2009, the school had more than 300 students on its rolls. According to the case affidavit, Oh conceded during that visit that three-quarters of the school's students did not attend class regularly and he could only produce course schedules for computer and ESL classes, even though the school was certified to accept foreign students in several other disciplines, including religious studies and Oriental medicine.

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