

Press Release

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Former Houston law office employee pleads guilty to immigration fraud

HOUSTON - A former employee of a Houston law office has pleaded guilty to conspiring to file false asylum applications on behalf of Chinese nationals who claimed they were being persecuted in China for practicing Christianity, U.S. Attorney Tim Johnson announced Friday. The investigation was conducted by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) with assistance from the U.S. Postal Inspection Service and the Department of Labor - Office of Inspector.

Elizabeth Jones, aka Elizabeth Tsai, 52, pleaded guilty to the charge before U.S. District Judge Melinda Harmon this morning. Jones was indicted in August 2007 and arrested in Hong Kong in January 2008. After waiving her right to an extradition hearing in Hong Kong, Jones was returned to Houston to face charges.

According to Jones's plea agreement, from 1999 through 2003, the law office for which Jones worked filed approximately 70 asylum applications on behalf of Chinese nationals that listed persecution based on practicing Christianity as the grounds for asylum. This was an unusually high number of applications from one law firm, claiming the same type of persecution and similar details of the claimed torture in the applications. An investigation by federal agents revealed the law office routinely provided clients seeking asylum with a Chinese-language document titled "Basic Facts About Christianity."

One of the asylum applicants, a Chinese national residing in Houston, visited the law office and met with Jones. Jones recommended the Chinese national file an application for asylum claiming he was persecuted in China for practicing Christianity even though he was not a Christian. Jones provided a statement of persecution which was included in the application.

The asylum story Jones provided falsely stated, among other things, that the Chinese national was arrested in China for bringing bibles to a church and that Chinese officials then tortured and "beat him up badly" in an attempt to have him provide the name of the foreign organization that provided the bibles.

Jones also provided the Chinese national with a study guide providing information about Christianity and a list of 200 bible verses to learn prior to the interview with the asylum officer. A receptionist at the law office told the Chinese national to rewrite the statement Jones created in his own handwriting because it "has to be in your own words."

The conspiracy conviction carries a maximum punishment of five years imprisonment and a \$250,000 fine. The court has permitted Jones to remain on bond pending sentencing on April 9, 2010.

Shelly Winn, of the Law Offices of Shelly Winn and Jones' employer during the relevant period, and the receptionist were also charged for their alleged role in this scheme. Winn is set for trial in late February 2010 and is presumed innocent unless and until convicted through due process of law. The charges against the receptionist, who passed away during the court case, have been dismissed by the court.

Assistant U.S. Attorneys Gregg Costa and Doug Davis are prosecuting the case.