Report Notes Lapses Between UN, Groups Linked to Bribery Scandal

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By AFP

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A UN report obtained by AFP highlighted regulatory lapses between the United Nations and outside groups linked to a Chinese real estate mogul who is accused of bribing former General Assembly president John Ashe.

Ashe, who was General Assembly president for a year from September 2013, was arrested in October by US authorities for allegedly accepting $1.3 million in bribes from a billionaire developer Ng Lap Seng.

Ng, from China's semi-autonomous city of Macau, is accused of using a foundation and non-governmental organisations to funnel bribes to UN diplomats in exchange for help promoting the construction of a proposed UN conference center in Macau.

The confidential report by the Office of Internal Oversight Services obtained by AFP found that several groups linked to Ng's Sun Kian Ip group "had partnered with departments/offices of the secretariat in various ways."

The review gave the UN secretariat a rating of "partially satisfactory" for its compliance with UN rules and procedures regarding such partnerships.

"A rating of 'partially satisfactory' means that important (but not critical or pervasive) deficiencies exist in governance, risk management or control processes," the report said.

Among those lapses, OIOS investigators found that an official UN document had been modified without clearance from UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's office. And a UN employee and his wife went on a trip paid by a non-governmental organisation accused of being a front for the bribery scheme.

A exhibition at the United Nations sponsored by one of the NGOs "could lead to the perception that the NGO was given preferential treatment of favor," the report added.

Some UN staff members who received free iPads at an event co-sponsored by one of the NGOs finally gave them back after the audit was ordered, the report noted.

This indicates "the need for dissemination of additional guidance to enhance staff members' awareness of their obligations in regard to gifts," it added.

Ashe was arrested along with Francis Lorenzo, the UN deputy ambassador from the Dominican Republic, who heads South-South News, a UN-accredited media outfit that reports on development issues.

The arrest of Ashe was a major blow to the United Nations, which is seeking to promote corruption-free good governance worldwide.