Foundation Head Pleads Guilty in U.N. Bribery Case

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By Nate Raymond/Reuters

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The head of a New York-based foundation pleaded guilty on Wednesday to participating in a scheme to bribe a former U.N. General Assembly president to advance various business interests, becoming the second defendant to admit wrongdoing in the case.

Sheri Yan, who was Global Sustainability Foundation's chief executive, pleaded guilty in federal court in Manhattan to one count of bribery in connection with illicit payments made to John Ashe, the former General Assembly president.

Choking back tears, Yan admitted that beginning in 2012, she agreed with others to pay money to Ashe, who was also the U.N. ambassador from Antigua and Barbuda, to influence officials in Antigua and the United Nations to support business interests.

"While I was doing these things, I knew that they were wrong," Yan said through a Mandarin interpreter.

The plea by Yan, 60, a U.S. citizen, comes less than a week after the former finance director at the foundation, Heidi Hong Piao, pleaded guilty and agreed to cooperate with authorities in their continuing investigation.

Both women were arrested in October by the Federal Bureau of Investigation as prosecutors unveiled charges over a multi-year scheme to pay more than $1.3 million in bribes to Ashe.

Unlike Piao, though, Yan's plea came without any agreement to cooperate with authorities. Under a plea agreement, Yan, who also is known as Shiwei Yan, agreed not to appeal any sentence of 7-1/4 years in prison. Her sentencing is set for April 29.

Prosecutors allege that Ashe, the U.N. General Assembly president from 2013 to 2014, accepted $1.3 million of bribes from Chinese businessmen to support their interests within the United Nations and Antigua.

Those bribes included over $800,000 from three businessmen that were arranged through Yan and Piao, prosecutors said.

In court, Yan said she and others paid Ashe to persuade officials in Antigua to enter into contracts with foreign companies, and to use his U.N. position help her and others promote business ventures from which we intended to profit.

Prosecutors have also charged Ng Lap Seng, a billionaire developer from the Chinese territory of Macau who allegedly paid $500,000 in bribes to Ashe through intermediaries.

Those intermediaries included Francis Lorenzo, a now-suspended deputy U.N. ambassador from the Dominican Republic, and Jeff Yin, Ng's assistant, prosecutors said.

Ashe, Lorenzo, Ng and Yin have pleaded not guilty.

Ashe, 61, has only been charged with tax fraud, as prosecutors have said diplomatic immunity may preclude any bribery charges. But prosecutors have said they were examining the issue and likely would bring further charges.

A lawyer for Ashe did not immediately respond to a request for comment.