# UN ambassador testifies he didn’t know what ‘bribe’ meant

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By: Larry Neumeister

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A suspended [United Nations](http://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/united-nations/) diplomat’s testimony has provided a glimpse at the seedier side of international diplomacy as a Chinese billionaire stands trial on charges that he shared hundreds of thousands of dollars with ambassadors he thought could help him realize his dream to build a permanent center in China to serve less-advantaged countries.

Francis Lorenzo, 50, stepped off the witness stand Wednesday after testifying against Chinese billionaire Ng Lap Seng for over a week.

Ng, 69, has pleaded not guilty to charges he paid bribes to Lorenzo and a former top [U.N.](http://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/united-nations/) official to gain support to build a [U.N.](http://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/united-nations/) conference center in Macau. He remains confined to a Manhattan apartment on $50 million bail.

Lorenzo testified Ng paid him up to $50,000 monthly to push the ambitious multibillion-dollar project along and funneled another $300,000 to former U.N. General Assembly President John Ashe, who was charged in the case before he died last year in an accident at home.

Over several days, Assistant U.S. Attorney [Douglas Zolkind](http://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/douglas-zolkind/) elicited from Lorenzo an unsavory depiction of the ease with which Lorenzo and Ashe accepted and sometimes solicited tens of thousands of dollars to supplement modest salaries as ambassadors.

Within months of meeting Ng in late 2009, Lorenzo testified, he agreed to supplement his $72,000 salary at the [U.N.](http://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/united-nations/) with $20,000 a month as president of Ng’s new not-for-profit, South South News.

“Did you have any experience in media or in news reporting?” [Zolkind](http://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/douglas-zolkind/) asked.

“No,” Lorenzo said.

He said at Ashe’s request, he helped arrange a no-show job that paid Ashe’s wife $2,500 monthly. He said Ashe asked Ng to fund a family trip to New Orleans and to pay for construction of a basketball court at his home. In 2014, Ashe asked Ng for a contribution to help his presidency and Ng sent $200,000, Lorenzo said.

After Ashe solicited a $20,000 contribution to fund a [U.N.](http://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/united-nations/) reception, Lorenzo passed along only $16,000 to Ashe.

“Why did you keep the other $4,000?” [Zolkind](http://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/douglas-zolkind/) asked.

“I just kept it for me,” Lorenzo said.

Lorenzo, who pleaded guilty to bribery charges and could face up to 78 years in prison without leniency, said Ng later began paying him an additional $30,000 a month to obtain official [U.N.](http://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/united-nations/) approval of his plan to build the Macau center. After it was approved, Ng bought a $3.2 million Manhattan apartment where Lorenzo planned to live. The center was never built.

Lorenzo, a U.S. citizen, said he dodged U.S. taxes by funneling the money through bank accounts in the names of his brother and sister in the Dominican Republic, where he lived until the mid-1980s.

On cross examination, Ng’s lawyer Tai Park asked Lorenzo why he never referred to money from Ng as bribes in dozens of meetings with prosecutors.

“I wasn’t familiar with the term,” he said.

In opening statements last month, Park portrayed Ng as a victim who was taken advantage of by pushy diplomats.

Park said his client never paid bribes, but did employ Lorenzo and make contributions when they were requested.

[Zolkind](http://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/douglas-zolkind/) asked Lorenzo why he did what Ng asked him to do.

“I was getting paid. I was on salary,” he answered.