

# **"Prince Charming" behind bars: Nigerian romance scammer nets 27-year prison sentence**

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EAST ST. LOUIS - Olayinka Ilumsa Sunmola, 33, of Lagos, Nigeria, was sentenced this morning to serve 324 months behind bars for an elaborate international romance scam he perpetrated from 2007 to 2014, U.S. Attorney Donald S. Boyce for the Southern District of Illinois announced today.

Evidence presented in court showed that Sunmola was the ringleader of a criminal organization operating in South Africa that targeted hundreds of women across the United States, including many in the St. Louis area. The thieves managed to make away with millions of dollars in wire transfers and various electronics through the simple promise of true, enduring love.

The U.S. Postal Inspection Service began investigating Sunmola in 2012, when a woman in the Southern District of Illinois complained that she had been conned by a man masquerading online as “Elias Dyess.” The investigation soon revealed that “Dyess” was merely one of the dozens of fictitious online profiles Sunmola and his confederates concocted on dating websites like Match.com to lure unsuspecting women. Portraying himself as an American soldier stationed overseas, or an engineer working on a large government contract in South Africa, Sunmola cultivated romantic relationships with dozens of women across the country. To further the conceit, he used photographs stolen from the hacked online accounts of real American men and researched facts about the American cities he pretended to be from. He also showered the women with poetry, cards, flowers, stuffed animals, and chocolates. Sunmola’s purpose was to lead each of his victims to believe that he was her “Prince Charming,” her one true love, and the man with whom she was destined to spend the rest of her life.

Once he had successfully beguiled his target, Sunmola began to manufacture phony emergencies, each of which required increasingly large amounts of money from his victims. He played upon each woman's romantic feelings and vulnerabilities, manipulating them into wiring him money or shipping him laptop computers, tablets, and cell phones – equipment he told them he needed to complete his government mission. The women were invariably told to direct their shipments to “Ilumsa Sunmola,” who was passed off as their lover's driver, or a co-worker, or a hotel manager. In fact, it was Sunmola himself who was slowly bleeding them dry. When the money inevitably ran out, or the women refused to send more, Sunmola would abruptly end the relationship.

A federal grand jury sitting in East St. Louis, Illinois, indicted Sunmola in November 2013 on charges of mail fraud, wire fraud, conspiracy, and interstate extortion. Officers with the London Metropolitan Police Service (sometimes referred to as “Scotland Yard”) later arrested Sunmola on the Southern Illinois indictment in August 2014, as he was about to board a plane from London to Johannesburg, South Africa. Sunmola eventually pled guilty to all eight counts of the indictment on March 2, 2016, after two full days of trial.

The United States has no way of knowing the precise amount of money Sunmola and his associates stole, but victims who responded to government requests for information reported total losses in excess of \$1.7 million – a figure Sunmola has been ordered to pay in restitution. The crime forced at least three women to file for bankruptcy. Several more lost their jobs and their homes and were left in total financial ruin. One victim who testified at the trial lost over \$90,000 to Sunmola. “Retirement should be a happy time,” she wrote to the court. “Instead, I am stressed and broke and working part time jobs at \$10 an hour to supplement my income.”

Two victims were present in the courtroom when the sentence was announced. A number of businesses were also defrauded by Sunmola and his associates, who used stolen credit card data from thousands of Americans to make fraudulent purchases online and over the phone. The loss incurred by one computer manufacturer alone was over \$800,000.

Even worse than the financial hardships Sunmola caused his victims was the profound emotional and psychological damage he inflicted on them. Many of the women believed they had finally found their true love. A few had even purchased wedding dresses. When the lie was exposed, their worlds collapsed. Some fell into depression. Two victims told the court they had seriously contemplated suicide. Even many years later, a number of Sunmola's victims remain withdrawn and untrusting, afraid to meet new people or to venture back out on the internet. For at least two women in Illinois, the

abuse was also sexual, as Sunmola stole images of their naked bodies, used the images to extort money from them, and then distributed their explicit images on the internet for anyone to see.

At sentencing, the United States argued that the court should depart upward from the range recommended by federal sentencing guidelines, because the crimes Sunmola committed were unusually cruel and caused his victims extreme psychological harm. In support of that argument, the government presented testimony from Monica Whitty, Ph. D., an Australian psychologist who has extensively researched online romance scams from her post at the United Kingdom's University of Leicester. Whitty testified that, in her expert opinion, the victims had indeed suffered a substantial and severe psychological impact. "They've in many ways experienced potentially permanent, life-altering changes in their lives. The long-term effects remain, years and years later."

United States District Judge David R. Herndon agreed. "'Conspiracy,' 'mail and wire fraud,' and 'interstate extortion' hardly sound like the kinds of crimes that leave broken lives, wrecked women, fractured families, devastation, desires to die, humiliation and shame so extreme," Judge Herndon said. "But then, his charm turned to bullying, name calling, extortion, unthinkable demands and threats. Thoughts of paradise turned into thoughts of hell and, for some, thoughts of suicide." Judge Herndon called it "the most devastating crime one could ever imagine without laying hands or even eyes on another human being."

When Sunmola has completed his 27-year prison term, he will be removed to his native home of Nigeria. For that reason, no term of supervised release was ordered. Imposition of a fine was also waived, in favor of the restitution award. Over \$200,000 in proceeds from the sale of Sunmola's four properties in South Africa has already been turned over to the District Court and will be proportionally disbursed to the individual identified victims. In the meantime, Judge Herndon expressed hope that the significant prison sentence would act as a deterrent for other scam artists, particularly Sunmola's "underlings": "When they hear of what sentence the boss received, they will hopefully be incentivized to stop their illegal activity immediately."

The case was investigated by the St. Louis Field Office of the Chicago Division of the U. S. Postal Inspection Service. "Criminals who look for or who expect anonymity of the mail or the borders of a country to protect them when conducting criminal activity are placed on notice today," said Inspector in Charge E.C. Woodson, Chicago Division U.S. Postal Inspection Service. "The U.S. Postal Inspection Service, in partnering with the U. S. Attorney's Office, will go beyond borders to ensure justice is served. Nothing is as painful as a broken heart, and this defendant caused extreme hardship to many of his victims."

A number of other law enforcement agencies assisted in the investigation and prosecution of this case, including the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Homeland Security Investigations, the U.S. Secret Service, the London Metropolitan Police Service, and the South African Police Service, which conducted its own extensive investigation into Sunmola's activities in South Africa and initiated the foreclosure proceedings on his properties.

The case was referred to the U.S. Attorney's Office by the Illinois Attorney General's Office as part of an ongoing partnership between the two offices to identify, investigate and prosecute international scammers who prey on Illinois residents. This prosecution is also part of a larger initiative with the Chicago Office of the Federal Trade Commission to target romance scammers. The prosecution was handled by Assistant United States Attorneys Nathan D. Stump, Bruce E. Reppert, and Emily J. Wasserman.