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Government attorney in L.A. is convicted of taking bribes from illegal immigrants

Constantine Kallas, assistant chief counsel with the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement office, accepted bribes of as much as \$20,000 in exchange for helping get benefits for illegal immigrants.

By Anna Gorman, Los Angeles Times

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A government attorney who posed as an immigration judge and accepted thousands of dollars in bribes from illegal immigrants was convicted Tuesday in Los Angeles of federal corruption charges, the U.S. attorney's office said.

A U.S. District Court jury found Constantine Peter Kallas, assistant chief counsel at the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement office in Los Angeles, guilty of bribery, fraud, conspiracy, identity theft and obstruction of justice.

"Justice was done," said Assistant U.S. Atty. Raymond O. Aghaian. "This was a man who held a position of trust, and he deceived and defrauded the people he was representing — the people of this district."

Kallas' attorney, Dean Steward, said that his client never accepted money but that he gave some immigrants advice and did favors for them "out of the kindness of his heart."

"Sadly, the evidence at trial showed that it spiraled out of control and ended up in the indictment," Steward said.

The guilty verdicts against Kallas, 39, came after a two-week trial and more than two days of deliberations. The prosecution's case included more than 20 witnesses, including two immigration judges. The defense did not put on any witnesses.

Kallas faces a maximum sentence of 256 years in federal prison when he is sentenced in August, though Steward said he expected a much shorter sentence.

Kallas' wife, Maria, 41, was also arrested and pleaded guilty in November to conspiracy, bribery and conspiracy to commit money laundering.

The case began in 2007 when an immigrant came forward and told authorities that an immigration official was taking bribes. That prompted a lengthy investigation by the FBI, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the Department of Labor and the Internal Revenue Service. Kallas, who had worked for the immigration agency since 1998, was arrested in June

2008 after taking a bribe at the San Manuel Indian Bingo and Casino in Highland, prosecutors said.

Steward said Kallas was set up by "opportunistic" immigrants.

In a search at Kallas' Alta Loma home, agents found a hidden floor safe with more than \$177,000 in cash and 24 official immigration files, prosecutors said. Agents also found a ledger with the names of more than 60 immigrants and how much they had paid. Bank accounts showed that on top of Kallas' salary, nearly \$1 million had been deposited in the couple's accounts since 2000, Aghaian said.

Prosecutors said Kallas accepted bribes of as much as \$20,000 in exchange for helping get benefits for illegal immigrants, some of whom were already in deportation proceedings. In one case, he took a \$7,000 bribe from his housekeeper and used his position to get a smuggling case against her daughter dismissed. After appearing in Immigration Court on behalf of the federal government, Kallas succeeded in getting the case dropped.

Paul Layman, assistant special agent in charge for the ICE Office of Professional Responsibility in Los Angeles, said Kallas has been on unpaid leave but that the agency now plans to move forward to remove him from his position.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement spokeswoman Virginia Kice said that this was an isolated case but that the nature of the work the agency does "is fraught with temptation."

"That is all the more reason we must hold our employees to the highest standard of conduct," she said.