

William Jefferson indicted in bribery probe

WASHINGTON (AP) - Rep. William Jefferson, D-La., was indicted Monday on federal charges of racketeering, money-laundering and soliciting more than \$400,000 in bribes in connection with years of trying to broker business deals in Africa.

The charges came almost two years after investigators raided Jefferson's home in Washington and found \$90,000 in cash stuffed in a box in his freezer.

The indictment in federal court in Alexandria, Va., lists 16 alleged violations with prison terms totaling as much as 235 years. Jefferson is charged with racketeering, soliciting bribes, wire fraud, money laundering, obstruction of justice and conspiracy. He is the first sitting congressman to face charges under the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, which prohibits corporate bribery overseas. Jefferson is to be arraigned this week in U.S. District Court in Alexandria.

Jefferson is accused of soliciting bribes from 11 different companies for himself and his family, and also of bribing a Nigerian official. The scheme was complicated, and Jefferson set up a front company to hide the money, prosecutors said.

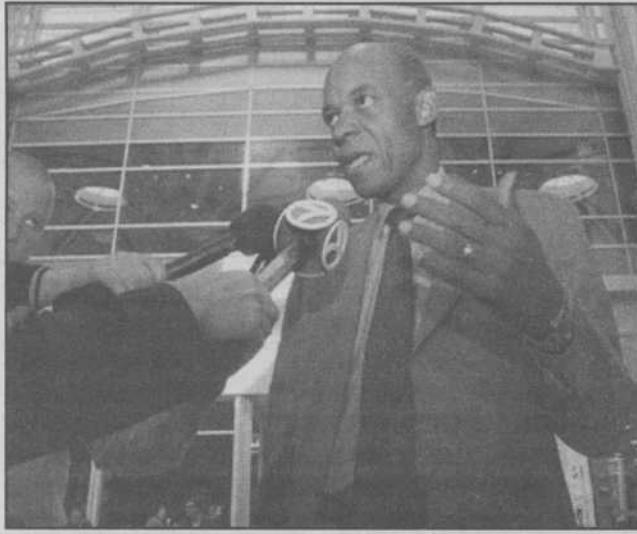
"But the essence of the charges are really very simple: Mr. Jefferson corruptly traded on his good office and on the Congress," said Chuck Rosenberg, the U.S. attorney for eastern Virginia.

The 60-year-old Jefferson, whose Louisiana district includes New Orleans, has said little about the case publicly but has maintained his innocence. He was re-elected last year despite the investigation.

Joseph Persichini, who leads FBI's Washington field office, called on the public to "take the time, read this charging document line by line, scheme by scheme, count by count. This case is about greed, power and arrogance."

Jefferson, in New Orleans earlier this week, could not immediately be reached for comment. His lawyer said they would announce a news conference.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi is expected to push this week for Jefferson to be stripped of his seat on the Small Business Committee, according to a leadership



Rep. William Jefferson, D-La., addresses the media at Washington's National Airport in this May 22, 2006 photo.

aide who spoke on condition of anonymity because the decision had not yet been announced.

"If these charges are proven true, they constitute an egregious and unacceptable abuse of public trust and power," said Pelosi, D-Calif. "Democrats are committed to upholding a high ethical standard and eliminating corruption and unethical behavior from the Congress."

House Republican Leader John Boehner of Ohio said Jefferson should be expelled from Congress if he is found guilty and refuses to resign.

"The American people rightfully expect the highest ethical standards from their elected leaders," Boehner said.

Two of Jefferson's associates have struck plea bargains with prosecutors and have been sentenced.

Brett Pfeffer, a former congressional aide, admitted soliciting bribes on Jefferson's behalf and was sentenced to eight years in prison.

Another Jefferson associate, Louisville, Ky., telecommunications executive Vernon Jackson, pleaded guilty to paying between \$400,000 and \$1 million in bribes to Jefferson in exchange for his assistance securing business deals in Nigeria and other African nations. Jackson was sentenced to more than seven years in prison.

Both Pfeffer and Jackson agreed to cooperate in the case against Jefferson.

The impact of the case has stretched across continents and even roiled presidential politics in Nigeria. According to court records, Jefferson told associates he needed cash to pay bribes to the country's vice president, Atiku Abubakar.

Abubakar denied the allegations, which figured

prominently in that country's presidential elections in April. He ran for the presidency and finished third. The indictment does not name Abubakar. But it describes Jefferson's dealings with an unnamed "Nigerian Official A" who was a high-ranking official in Nigeria's executive branch who had a spouse in Potomac, Md. One of Abubakar's wives lived in that Washington suburb. Rosenberg would not confirm that person was Abubakar. In Lagos, Nigeria, Abubakar spokesman Garba Shehu said the former vice president "has always denied

wrongdoing in the matter."

"He has only had official interaction with the congressman, who the vice president felt deserved a hearing because he was a ranking member of the U.S. Congress," Shehu said. "The vice president was in no way cited in this thing, so we feel vindicated."

Court records indicate Jefferson was videotaped taking a \$100,000 cash bribe from an FBI informant. Most of that money later turned up in the freezer in Jefferson's home. In May 2006, the FBI raided Jefferson's congressional office, the first such

raid on a congressman's Capitol office. That move sparked a constitutional debate over whether the executive branch stepped over a boundary.

The raid's legality is still being argued on appeal. House leaders objected to the search, saying it was an unconstitutional intrusion on the lawmaking process. The FBI said the raid was necessary because Jefferson and his legal team had failed to respond to requests for documents. Some but not all the documents seized in the raid have been turned over Justice Department prosecutors.

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