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California Man Pleads Guilty to Scheme to Defraud Afghan Government on U.S. Funded Contract

WASHINGTON – A California man pleaded guilty Tuesday for his role in a scheme to defraud the government of Afghanistan of over \$100 million. These funds were provided to Afghanistan by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) for the purpose of constructing an electric grid in Afghanistan, in connection with the long-standing U.S. effort to strengthen that country's basic infrastructure.

According to court documents, Saed Ismail Amiri, 38, of Granite Bay, was at various times either the owner or senior consultant of Assist Consultants Incorporated (ACI), an Afghan company that had received over \$250 million in U.S. funded contracts since 2013. In or around January 2015, USAID, in connection with the U.S. effort to assist Afghanistan and its people, authorized the national power utility of Afghanistan, Da' Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat (DABS), to solicit bids on a U.S. funded contract to construct five electric power substations to connect Afghanistan's Northeastern and Southeastern electric grid systems. Bids were sought only from companies that had substantial experience building electric power substations. Specifically, the contract criteria required bidders, such as ACI, to have previously worked on two electric substations of 220 kilovolts or more.

In 2015 and 2016, Amiri, ACI employees, and others engaged in a scheme to obtain the contract by submitting a false work history and fraudulent supporting documents in an effort to deceive DABS into believing that ACI met the required contract criteria. More specifically, in July 2015, ACI submitted a bid on the contract for \$112,292,241.05, and ACI underbid its competitors by more than \$20 million. In the bid, ACI stated that it had worked as a subcontractor to a prime contractor on two 220 kilovolt substations for a cement factory in Uganda and a textile company in Nigeria. In fact, the alleged prime contractor was a fictitious company that ACI had invented and controlled, ACI had never worked to build a substation in Africa, and neither the Ugandan cement factory nor the Nigerian textile company existed.

In February 2016, Amiri returned to his residence in the Los Angeles area, at which time DABS had contacted ACI and requested supporting documents to verify ACI's work history. Amiri then sent emails to co-conspirators outside California, including emails in which he advised that some of them would need to go to Uganda and Nigeria to obtain false documents to respond to DABS. Amiri thereafter departed the United States and, in furtherance of the scheme, emailed DABS documents he knew were false and altered, including ACI's purported subcontract to work on the Ugandan substation; coordinates of the substation; photographs; false bank records; and a false letter purporting to be from a Ugandan government official. After submitting the fake records to DABS, Amiri met with U.S. law enforcement at the U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan. During that meeting, Amiri falsely stated, among other things, that he had learned the prior month that ACI had bid on the contract. Shortly thereafter, Amiri withdrew ACI's bid. In a subsequent interview with law enforcement, Amiri also falsely stated that another ACI employee had submitted the false documents to DABS, when in truth and in fact, Amiri had emailed the false documents himself.

Amiri pleaded guilty to wire fraud. He is scheduled to be sentenced at a later date and faces a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison. A federal district court judge will determine any sentence after considering the U.S. Sentencing Guidelines and other statutory factors.

Acting Assistant Attorney General Nicholas L. McQuaid of the Justice Department's Criminal Division; Acting U.S. Attorney Tracy Wilkison of the Central District of California; Inspector General John F. Sopko of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR); and Acting Inspector General Thomas J. Ullom of the USAID Office of Inspector General (USAID-OIG) made the announcement.

SIGAR and USAID-OIG are investigating the case.

Trial Attorney Matt Kahn of the Criminal Division's Fraud Section and Assistant U.S. Attorney Jeff Mitchell of the Central District of California are prosecuting the case.

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