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Soboba tribal chairman indicted in $250,000 bribery case

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By JOHN ASBURY
The Press-Enterprise

PDF: Salgado indictment

FBI agents arrested Soboba Tribal Chairman Robert Salgado Sr. on Friday on a 36-count federal indictment charging that in exchange for lucrative private contracts, he accepted a quarter-million dollars in bribes to pay his family's bills.

Salgado, 67, surrendered to federal agents Friday afternoon outside U.S. District Court in Riverside. Hours earlier, authorities had notified him of the federal grand jury's indictment last week.

Salgado was released from federal custody on a $150,000 bond. He did not speak during a brief hearing, and his attorney and family declined to comment outside the courtroom.

Story continues below

Robert Salgado Sr.

In an e-mail released later by a Soboba tribal information officer, attorney Robert A. Davis Jr. said: "As the U.S. Attorney's press release states, these are allegations, and Chairman Salgado has come to court today to clear them up."

Prosecutors accused Salgado of accepting more than $250,000 in bribes in the form of checks and cash from

four vendors seeking service contracts, real estate deals and construction improvements related to the Soboba Band of Luiseño Indians and the Soboba casino just north of San Jacinto, the indictment states.

"Defendant Salgado informed vendors that to obtain or keep contracts with or involving the Soboba Band, the vendors would have to make payments to him," the document states. "Vendors then made payments requested by defendant Salgado in order to obtain and keep these contracts."

Salgado directed vendors to pay credit card bills and other debt he and his wife owed, the indictment states.

In addition to 29 bribery charges in incidents as far back as 1999, the grand jury handed down one charge of conspiracy and six of filing false tax returns.

FBI officials would not say what prompted the investigation of Salgado's business practices.

Only one vendor was identified in the indictment: co-defendant Abbas Shilleh, who owns California Parking Services. Shilleh was charged with two counts of bribery related to his company, which provides valet parking for the Soboba Casino.

Authorities would not discuss whether any other investigations are under way or if more indictments are planned.

U.S. attorney's spokesman Thom Mrozek said Salgado's indictment does not call the Soboba tribe or casino into question.

"We're not making any accusations related to activity conducted by the tribe or the tribe's business practices," Mrozek said.

There was no answer at Salgado's home Friday afternoon. Soboba tribal Vice-Chairwoman Rosemary Morillo said she didn't know about the indictments and could not comment.

Rocky past

Salgado has served as tribal chairman on and off since 1976. During that time, he has helped the tribe establish the Soboba Casino, which is trying to expand and has generated a robust income for the tribe.

He helped the tribe negotiate a landmark deal to secure its own water rights on tribal lands that passed Congress last year.

Last year he got into a war of words with the Riverside County Sheriff's Department after the deaths of three tribal members during shootouts with deputies on the reservation.

Salgado initiated a policy in July 2008 of preventing sheriff's deputies from entering the reservation, prompting Sheriff Stanley Sniff to request the National Indian Gaming Commission to suspend the tribe's gaming license if the practice didn't cease.

Both sides reported this year that the relationship has mended. The commission took no action.

FBI spokesman Laura Eimiller said the Sheriff's Department was not involved in the investigation of Salgado.

Lt. Ray Wood said the sheriff's Tribal Liaison Unit served in an advisory role after being notified that the arrest was planned.

Tribal liaisons suggested that FBI agents call Salgado directly to notify him of the indictment. FBI officials then asked him to surrender at the courthouse.

charges detailed

The federal grand jury that convened in Los Angeles in February analyzed Salgado's business records through 2009.

The charges against Salgado fall under federal jurisdiction because he represents a tribe that receives more

than $10,000 in federal funds annually.

"The chairman exercised substantial influence over the business dealings of the tribe. Among other things, the chairman signed contracts on behalf of the Soboba band," the indictment states.

In one count, a vendor is accused of writing seven checks to pay more than $40,000 of personal bills owed by Robert and Claudia Salgado. Another bribery count states that Robert Salgado accepted a $5,000 check for tickets to a boxing match.

The indictment states that Salgado and his wife accepted eight checks for more than $10,000 each to pay personal bills. The chairman twice accepted checks for $15,000 and twice accepted $2,500 in cash from different vendors.

In tax returns from 2001 to 2006, Salgado substantially under-reported his income, the indictment states.

If convicted, he faces 10 years in prison for each bribery charge, five years for the conspiracy charge and three years for each income tax charge.

Salgado is scheduled to be arraigned Nov. 2 in U.S. District Court in Los Angeles.

Staff writer Dug Begley contributed to this report.

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