



Some Ukraine refugees taking a rest along the M 11 highway.

CRAIG RUTTLE

27 MONTHS FOR 'BIRTH TOURISM'

Ringleader used pregnant Turks in citizenship scam

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The East Patchogue-based ringleader of a massive "birth tourism" scheme, in which dozens of pregnant Turkish women paid up to \$10,000 to give birth in Suffolk County so that their children would have U.S. citizenship, teared up in federal court Tuesday in Central Islip as he apologized for his crimes before a judge sentenced him to 27 months in prison.

Ibrahim Aksakal, 50, pleaded guilty in October to conspiring to commit health care and wire fraud for his role in the operation, which took place between 2017 and 2020.

"I very much regret what I've done," said Aksakal, who spent the past 15 months in near solitary conditions at the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn. "This is my country. I love it . . . But I deserve [the sentence]. I did it."

U.S. District Judge Joanna Seybert said Aksakal committed a "major crime" that "attacks what many people consider the prize of the American citizenship."

But Seybert said her sentence took into account Aksakal's host of medical ailments — including diabetes and the aftereffects of contracting COVID-19 in prison — his remorsefulness and his willingness to sign an order stipulating that he will not contest his deportation back to Turkey following the completion of his sentence.

"This [sentence] takes into account his whole life," said Seybert, who ordered Aksakal to pay \$1 million in restitution and forfeit nearly \$400,000.

Prosecutors said Aksakal

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and five co-conspirators, mainly Long Islanders with Turkish backgrounds, advertised and recruited women on two Turkish-language Facebook pages, whose titles roughly translate to "Giving Birth in America" and "My baby should be born in America," federal prosecutors said.

The operators of the scheme were arrested in December 2020 and originally charged with Medicaid fraud because the scheme involved the women claiming they were indigent, enabling them to receive Medicaid. The government ended up paying \$2.1 million for their care while in the country, officials said.

The 117 women, who gave birth to 119 children, were in fact of middle-class or upper middle-class backgrounds — a large number were professionals, including doctors and flight attendants on Turkish airlines — who came into the country under tourist or business visas, officials said. They were instructed to conceal their pregnancies when they entered the country, prosecutors said.

Assistant United States Attorney Bradley King said Aksakal "cynically" abused the system and "burdened taxpayers for decades to come."

The women returned to Turkey and were not charged, and their babies are "most likely" to keep their U.S. citizenships under current laws, officials said.

While the women were in the U.S. they lived in so-called "birth houses" in West Babylon, Center Moriches, Dix Hills, East Northport, East Patchogue and Smithtown, officials said.

Defense attorney Matthew Brissenden said his client suffered years of physical abuse in Turkey at the hands of his father before coming to the United States with no financial support or advanced education.

Aksakal eventually became a small-business owner but his life was "completely destroyed" by the scheme and left in "smoldering wreckage," Brissenden said.

The defendants promised the pregnant women that their fee, which ranged between \$7,500 and \$10,000, would cover everything from housing to transportation to "insurance" coverage, which prosecutors said turned out to be fraudulent Medicaid payments.

The defendants, meanwhile, collected \$750,000 from the women, which was largely deposited in banks in Turkey and is likely out of the reach of seizure by U.S. officials, prosecutors said.

Suffolk police said the scheme came to light after they received a tip from an unidentified Smithtown clerk after seeing five pregnant women in the same home over a short period.

Brissenden said his client is "profoundly remorseful" for his actions and deeply loves the United States.

"The irony is this case about the extreme lengths people will go to in order to enjoy the benefits of living in this country," he said.

Criminal cases against the other five defendants are ongoing.

Photographer records Ukraine refugee crisis

New York City-based photojournalist Craig Ruttle traveled to Ukraine to document the humanitarian crisis.

They kept coming.

Cars filled with people desperately seeking sanctuary last week from the Russian invasion of Ukraine were backed up for about 15 miles heading west on the M 11 highway. Their destination was the Shehyni-Medyka crossing at the Polish-Ukrainian border.

Carrying what few belongings they can, at least 2 million Ukrainians — half of them children — have fled their

wounded country by car, train and any way they are able since the invasion began on Feb. 24, UN officials have estimated. It is the worst refugee crisis in Europe since World War II.

The wait at the border checkpoint stretched into hours, and for some non-Ukrainian citizens, including students from India, the Middle East and Africa, as much as five days.

They waited in freezing temperatures and in the dark of night without shelter.

And once across the border, in Poland, there would finally be safe haven from violence, fear and death.



Medyka Shehyni crossing on Friday night.

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