

Grand Rapids engineer sues Nigerians for \$100 million

Lawsuit claims African officials took his money, but refused to pay him

By Associated Press

GRAND RAPIDS—A Grand Rapids engineer has filed a \$100-million federal lawsuit against Nigeria and its state-run oil company, alleging that they refused to make good on a \$25-million contract and that he was cheated out of \$500,000 while trying to recover the money.

Will Tolliver's lawsuit, filed in U.S. District Court, accuses the western Africa nation and the Nigerian National Petroleum Corp. of breach of contract and racketeering, which, if sustained, could triple any damages awarded.

More than 20 Nigerian individuals also are listed as defendants. No defendants' lawyers were listed on the lawsuit, which was assigned to Judge Douglas W. Hillman. Because of a Nigerian holiday, there was no one available Tuesday at that nation's embassy in Washington, D.C., to comment on the suit.

Tolliver's attorney, Todd Knecht, said Nigeria contacted the American Concrete Pipe Association about an oil pipeline problem. The pipe association suggested the job go to Tolliver, a highly regarded specialist with 54 patents and four others pending.

"My client was recommended," Knecht said. "He actually had a contract."

Tolliver first heard from the Nigerians in 1994 after they learned that a concrete pipe faced rupture because it was not settling properly underground.

The proposed solution was very expensive, so the state oil company turned to Tolliver for a cheaper alternative.

Nigerian officials proposed giving him 10 percent of whatever he would save over the original engineering proposal. The repair project was completed and the savings were pegged at \$250 million.

"When I did the job, I thought there wouldn't be any trouble. I'm working with the Nigerian government. It's an oil-rich country. They should be able to pay their debts," Tolliver told The Grand Rapids Press for a story Tuesday.

Tolliver never received his \$25 million, however, and resigned himself to getting nothing.

Then, in July 1999 four years after the work was completed, he received a letter from officials who claimed to represent the government. They told Tolliver that he would get his money, although he first would have to pay a few "routine" fees.

What followed, according to the lawsuit filed May 9, was a scam of international proportions in which Tolliver, who was ill at the time, had an associate travel the world negotiating with Nigerians. Each step of the way, the associate paid tens of thousands of dollars for pledges that the money soon would be coming.

"When you're looking at collecting \$25 million, you're willing to spend a few dollars in order to affect collection," Tolliver said. "They just keep you on a string and you just keep following."

At one point, the contract was re-negotiated and Tolliver was told that he would receive \$100 million for his efforts. The fees also continued, and after paying about \$500,000, Tolliver ended his spending.

"You look at it and realize, I am throwing good money after bad money," he said.