Macau Tycoon Gets 4 Years in Prison for Bribing U.N. Diplomats

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A billionaire real estate developer from Macau was sentenced to four years in prison on Friday for bribing two diplomats, including a former president of the United Nations General Assembly, to help him build a conference center in Macau.

The corruption case was the worst financial scandal for the world body since the abuse of the Iraqi oil-for-food program more than 20 years ago. In 2016, a panel appointed by the secretary general at the time, Ban Ki-moon, [recommended](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-un-corruption-exclusive/exclusive-u-n-audit-identifies-serious-lapses-linked-to-alleged-bribery-idUSKCN0X00VD) new ethical rules and financial disclosure standards for the president the General Assembly, who is elected on a yearly basis.

The developer, Ng Lap Seng, 69, was convicted in Federal District Court in Manhattan last July on two counts of violating the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, one count of paying bribes, one count of money laundering, and two counts of conspiracy.

The judge, Vernon S. Broderick, ordered Mr. Ng to forfeit $1.5 million, representing the assets used in the crimes, and to pay a $1 million fine.

Prosecutors had sought a sentence of more than six years, while Mr. Ng’s lawyers had urged Judge Broderick to sentence him to time served and let him return to China. Mr. Ng, who is also known as David Ng and as Wu Lisheng (the Mandarin transliteration of his Cantonese name), has been under house arrest [since 2015](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/30/nyregion/chinese-magnate-is-accused-of-lying-about-millions-in-cash-he-brought-to-us.html).

From 2011 to 2015, prosecutors said, Mr. Ng paid bribes to two diplomats at the United Nations, Francis Lorenzo of the Dominican Republic and [John W. Ashe](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/23/world/americas/john-ashe-ex-diplomat-accused-in-un-corruption-case-dies-at-61.html) of Antigua and Barbuda. Mr. Ashe served as president of the General Assembly in 2013-14.

The bribes were intended to secure the diplomats’ support for a multibillion-dollar conference center in Macau that Mr. Ng hoped to build using his company, the Sun Kian Ip Group. The center would have hosted meetings, discussions and other events, and served as a home for the [Global South-South Development Expo](http://www.expo.unsouthsouth.org/), which brings together poor countries to cooperate on development goals.

Some of the payments were funneled through South-South News, a New York-based organization Mr. Ng set up as a media platform to advance the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals.

Prosecutors said that Mr. Ng hoped that the center would help transform Macau, a former Portuguese colony now best known as a gambling hub, into the “Geneva of Asia.”

“Hiding behind and misusing a nongovernmental organization that he founded and funded allegedly to help developing nations rather than himself, the defendant orchestrated and led a scheme to pay bribes to two senior U.N. ambassadors, one of whom was the elected leader of the U.N. General Assembly,” federal prosecutors wrote in a sentencing memo. “He kept doing so until he was caught, and then claimed that he was an innocent philanthropist, whose arrest was both political and wrongful. It was neither.”

Mr. Ashe [died](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/23/world/americas/john-ashe-ex-diplomat-accused-in-un-corruption-case-dies-at-61.html) in 2016 at age 61 when a barbell he was lifting dropped on his neck. Mr. Lorenzo pleaded guilty to bribery and money laundering, and he testified against Mr. Ng at his trial.

Three other defendants have been convicted: [Heidi Hong Piao](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-crime-un-idUSKCN0US2TE20160114) pleaded guilty to bribery and other charges, and like Mr. Lorenzo awaits sentencing; Jeff C. Yin pleaded guilty to conspiracy to defraud the United States and was sentenced to seven months in prison; and [Shiwei Yan](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/21/nyregion/executive-in-un-corruption-case-pleads-guilty.html) pleaded guilty to bribery and was sentenced to 20 months in prison.

Mr. Ng’s lawyer, Andrew M. Genser, said his client’s motivations were patriotic and philanthropic. “Given the obvious time, expense and risk involved in pursuing a project of this scope, the possibility of any economic benefit to Mr. Ng was necessarily remote and speculative,” Mr. Genser wrote in a memo to the court urging leniency.

According to that memo, Mr. Ng was the eighth of nine children of a poor family in Guangdong Province in southern China, only four of whom lived to adulthood. He moved to Macau in 1979 and built a successful fabric-selling business before moving into real estate. During the property downturn that followed the SARS epidemic of 2003, he made big investments in real estate, becoming a billionaire a decade later.

Geoffrey S. Berman, the interim United States attorney for the Southern District of New York, described the punishment as appropriate.

“Billionaire Ng Lap Seng corrupted the highest levels of the United Nations in pursuit of a multibillion-dollar real estate deal in Macau,” he said in a statement. “Ng exploited a center for international diplomacy as an instrument for his greedy intentions. This office is committed to policing official corruption wherever it may be found.”

Brenden Varma, a spokesman for the current General Assembly president, Miroslav Lajcak of Slovakia, who took up that position in September, said in a statement that he “feels strongly that the General Assembly should always operate in accordance with the highest standards of ethics, accountability and transparency.”

The statement added that Mr. Lajcak “led by example,” by being the first General Assembly president to make public his personal financial disclosure summary. “He considers such matters to be of crucial importance,” the statement added.