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Former Willbros executives get prison in bribery case

By MARY FLOOD Copyright 2010 Houston Chronicle

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Two former executives of a Willbros Group subsidiary were sentenced to more than a year in prison each Thursday for their part in bribing Nigerian officials with \$6 million in a scheme to win a major natural gas pipeline contract.

U.S. District Judge Sim Lake sentenced Jim Bob Brown, 48, to a year and a day in prison and fined him \$17,500. Jason Edward Steph, 40, received 15 months and was fined \$2,000. Both pleaded guilty to one count of conspiring to violate the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act.

"I allowed myself to be influenced by the corrupt nature of the international business community. It's no excuse," Brown told the judge in accepting full responsibility.

Brown's lawyer, Mark Weinhardt, asked the judge to look at his client through the lens of his experience in Nigeria, where he'd been kidnapped, shot at, beaten and threatened. But the judge noted evidence showed Brown also was involved in bribing officials in Ecuador for Willbros.

Steph told the judge that he was doing what he was told to do by supervisors.

"I didn't know how wrong it was, but I knew it was wrong," said Steph, who also accepted full



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responsibility for his actions.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Laura Perkins asked for some consideration for both men because they helped the government develop other charges, but said they should serve prison terms because the crimes undermine free markets and hurt the citizens of foreign lands.

Lake said he didn't relish sentencing the men to prison terms but added that he felt it essential to deter others from committing such crimes.

The judge said he wanted to send a message to the business community, although he noted that one of the Nigerian officials bribed in this case is apparently now running for office. He said he doesn't think the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act here has mattered much in cleaning up "the cesspool that was Nigeria at this time."

Willbros Group, an engineering-construction firm with its administrative headquarters in Houston, itself agreed to pay \$32.3 million in penalties in a deferred adjudication settlement in the bribery scheme.

A third individual defendant, former consultant Paul Novak, pleaded guilty to a charge in the case. A fourth former executive, Kenneth Tillery, is a fugitive.

From around 2003 to 2005, Willbros International, a Willbros Group subsidiary, was bidding on a \$387 million natural gas pipeline

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