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Fugitive Couple Extradited to the United States from Montenegro to Begin Prison Sentences for \$20 Million Fraud

WASHINGTON – A California couple who fled to Montenegro to avoid serving lengthy prison sentences has been returned to the United States after approximately one year and two months as fugitives.

Richard Ayvazyan, 44, and his wife, Marietta Terabelian, 38, were extradited by Montenegro and arrived in Los Angeles last night. They are expected to appear in U.S. District Court in Los Angeles this afternoon.

In June 2021, Ayvazyan and Terabelian were convicted by a federal jury of leading a conspiracy to fraudulently obtain over \$20 million in COVID-19 relief funds. After the trial, Ayvazyan and Terabelian fled the United States. In November 2021, they were [sentenced in absentia](#). Ayvazyan was sentenced to 17 years in prison, and Terabelian was sentenced to six years in prison. U.S. authorities later determined the couple had fled to Montenegro.

According to court documents and evidence presented at trial, Ayvazyan and Terabelian were members of a Los Angeles-based fraud ring who engaged a scheme to fraudulently obtain more than \$20 million in Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) and Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL) COVID-19 relief funds. Ayvazyan and Terabelian used dozens of fake, stolen, or synthetic identities – including names belonging to elderly or deceased people and foreign exchange students who briefly visited the United States years ago and never returned – to submit fraudulent applications for approximately 150 PPP and EIDL loans.

In support of the fraudulent loan applications, Ayvazyan and Terabelian also submitted false and fictitious documents to lenders and the Small Business Administration (SBA), including fake identity documents, tax documents, and payroll records. Ayvazyan and Terabelian then used the fraudulently obtained funds as down payments on three luxury homes in California. They also used the funds to buy gold coins, diamonds, jewelry, luxury watches, fine imported furnishings, designer handbags, clothing, and a Harley-Davidson motorcycle.

Assistant Attorney General Kenneth A. Polite, Jr. of the Justice Department's Criminal Division; U.S. Attorney Martin Estrada for the Central District of California; Assistant Director Luis Quesada of the FBI's Criminal Investigative Division; Special Agent in Charge Tyler Hatcher of the IRS Criminal Investigation (IRS-CI), Los Angeles Field Office; Special Agent in Charge Weston King of the SBA Office of Inspector General (SBA-OIG), Western Region; and Special Agent in Charge Jay N. Johnson of the Federal Housing Finance Agency Office of Inspector General (FHFA-OIG), Western Region made the announcement.

The Government of Montenegro, including the Ministry of Justice, provided significant assistance in the extradition of Ayvazyan and Terabelian to the United States. The Justice Department's Office of International Affairs also provided substantial assistance in securing the arrest and extradition of Ayvazyan and Terabelian.

The FBI Los Angeles Field Office, IRS-CI, SBA-OIG, and FHFA-OIG investigated this matter. The U.S. Marshals Service transported Ayvazyan and Terabelian from Montenegro to the United States.

Trial Attorney Christopher Fenton of the Criminal Division's Fraud Section and Assistant U.S. Attorneys Brian Faerstein and Scott Paetty for the Central District of California are prosecuting the case. Assistant U.S. Attorney Dan Boyle for the Central District of California is handling forfeiture. Trial Attorney Goran Krnaich and International Affairs Specialist Taylor Cole of the Justice Department's Office of International Affairs handled the extraditions.

The Fraud Section leads the Criminal Division's prosecution of fraud schemes that exploit the PPP. Since the inception of the CARES Act, the Fraud Section has prosecuted more than 192 defendants in more than 121 criminal cases related to CARES Act programs and funds. The Fraud Section has also seized more than \$78 million in cash proceeds derived from fraudulently obtained PPP funds, as well as numerous real estate properties and luxury items purchased with such proceeds. More information can be found at <https://www.justice.gov/criminal-fraud/ppp-fraud>.

On May 17, 2021, the Attorney General established the COVID-19 Fraud Enforcement Task Force to marshal the resources of the Department of Justice in partnership with agencies across government to enhance efforts to combat and prevent pandemic-related fraud. The Task Force bolsters efforts to investigate and prosecute the most culpable domestic and international criminal actors and assists agencies tasked with administering relief programs to prevent fraud by augmenting and incorporating existing coordination mechanisms, identifying resources and techniques to uncover fraudulent actors and their schemes, and sharing and harnessing information and insights gained from prior enforcement efforts. For more information on the department's response to the pandemic, please visit <https://www.justice.gov/coronavirus>.

Anyone with information about allegations of attempted fraud involving COVID-19 can report it by calling the Department of Justice's National Center for Disaster Fraud (NCDF) Hotline via the NCDF Web Complaint Form at <https://www.justice.gov/disaster-fraud/ncdf-disaster-complaint-form>.

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