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New York jury hears closing arguments in Manuel Chang trial

Austin Cope

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A New York federal jury has heard closing arguments in the US wire fraud and money laundering trial against former Mozambique finance minister Manuel Chang.

Prosecutors painted the former finance minister of Mozambique as a corrupt official who took millions of dollars in bribes to sign off on a scheme to create fraudulent maritime contracts to attract international investors. The 5 August arguments cap off a two-week trial in which Chang stands accused of taking $7 million in bribes from international shipbuilding company Privinvest for participating the scheme.

“At every step of the way, the defendant made a choice," assistant US attorney Genny Ngai told the jury. “He chose to take part in the scheme; he chose to take millions of dollars in bribes because he cared about money more than about his position.”

Much of the government’s case relied on the alleged coordination between ex-Credit Suisse bankers **Andrew Pearse** and Surjan Singh – who pleaded guilty to their involvement in the scheme and cooperated as witnesses in the trial – to secure the loan guarantees from the former minister. Though the witnesses’ contact with Chang was limited to only a few meetings, they testified that they referred to him between each other using insensitive nicknames like “chopstick,” “kung fu” and “pantero”. The nicknames, which the alleged co-conspirators never used with Chang directly, pointed to their knowledge of his involvement in the scheme, Ngai argued.

She also pointed to evidence presented from internal Privinvest ledgers, emails between Privinvest CEO Jean Boustani – who was **acquitted in 2019** – and testimony from the alleged co-conspirators who coordinated the bribes. She described close relationships between Boustani and Chang, including lavish trips to Paris and the estate of the late Privinvest owner Iskandar Safa, as well as a gift of over 1000 bottles of wine, honey and olive oil to Chang’s wife. She also pointed to Chang’s nickname for Boustani saved in his phone, translated from Portuguese as “Jean Three Kisses”.

She also outlined Chang’s alleged scheme to launder the money paid from Privinvest and one of its subsidiaries through New York banks into a Swiss bank account owned by Luís Filipe Pereira Rocha Brito, whom they portrayed as a close friend of Chang’s. Brito later covered up the payments using fake invoices for a car dealership, which they showed to the jury.

Chang's defence lawyer, Adam Ford of Ford O'Brien Landy portrayed the former minister as a public servant doing what he thought was best for his country with little knowledge of the consequences of the projects and the people involved. He pushed back on the nicknames, pointedly referring to Chang as "Minister Chang" and arguing that Chang's decision to sign off on the loans came from other economic factors at the time – especially a 2011 discovery of natural gas reserves in the country. Ford added that the projects were initially expected to come through, even though they eventually failed.

"Everything was delivered. Mozambique got their shipyards, they got their fleet, they got their fishing contracts," Ford said. "[Chang] had no way of knowing at the time he signed these what the future would hold."

He also cast doubt on whether Chang used the money to enrich himself – noting there were no records of purchases he had made with the bribe money or any mention of him having followed up on its uses.

And he said the government didn't provide enough evidence to prove the overall case beyond a reasonable doubt. There was no direct bank record evidence of the bribe payments, no records of any negotiations between Chang and the co-conspirators and no clear indication of conspiracy shown in the text messages the government pointed to as evidence of the coordinated effort to bribe Chang, he argued.

"Every text message is a dramatic buildup, where you're expecting to see something going on here, like a $7 million exchange," he said. "But there's nothing."

Counsel to Manuel Chang

Ford O'Brien Landy

Partners Adam Ford and Jamie Solano, counsel Anjula Prasad and Stephen Halpin III and associates Arthur Kutoroff and Carolyn Sartori in New York City

For the DOJ

Assistant US attorneys Hiral Mehta, Genny Ngai and Jonathan Siegel in the Eastern District of New York, trial attorneys Katherine Nielsen and Peter Cooch in the criminal division fraud section and Margaret Moeser and Morgan Cohen in the Money Laundering and Asset Recovery Section (MLARS) in Washington, DC

Austin Cope

Reporter

Global Investigations Review

Austin.Cope@globalinvestigationsreview.com

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