

US cable: Pfizer sought dirt on Nigerian official

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(AP) -- Drug maker Pfizer Inc. hired investigators to uncover "corruption links" to Nigeria's embattled former attorney general in an attempt to stop federal cases over a 1996 drug study, according to a U.S. embassy cable released Friday by WikiLeaks.

Pfizer denied the claims in the cable, calling its contents "simply preposterous."

The cable quotes April 2009 conversations that U.S. Embassy staff had with Pfizer officials, just a month before the Nigerian government and the New York-based pharmaceutical company announced a \$75 million settlement over the meningitis study.

The cable suggests associates of former Attorney General Michael Aondoakaa pressured him to drop the cases against Pfizer, fearful that other damaging information about his dealings would be made public.

"Although Pfizer has not seen any documents from the U.S. Embassy in Nigeria regarding the federal government cases, any notion that the company hired investigators in connection to the former attorney general is simply preposterous," the company said in a statement.

A spokesman for the U.S. Embassy in Nigeria's capital, Abuja, declined to comment Friday.

The British newspaper The Guardian and the Spanish newspaper El Pais

first published details of the cable in their Friday editions.

Meningitis, an infection of the lining that surrounds the brain and spinal cord, sickened more than 56,000 people in Nigeria in 2009 alone, according to the World Health Organization. More than 2,400 died. The disease can be prevented by vaccine.

In 1996, Pfizer treated 100 meningitis-infected children around the northern Nigeria city of Kano with an experimental antibiotic called Trovan. An additional 100 children, who were control patients in the study, received an approved antibiotic. But the families' attorneys allege the dose was lower than recommended.

Eleven children died during the clinical trial, which was performed during an outbreak of the disease. Lawsuits filed against the company alleged many children were left with brain damage, paralysis or slurred speech.

Pfizer denied all the charges and said its scientists acted lawfully, keeping with professional standards while testing the drug. The drug manufacturer also insisted its records demonstrate that none of the deaths was linked to Trovan or substandard treatment, and that mental damage and other serious disabilities are known aftereffects of meningitis.

In the cable dated April 20, 2009, embassy officials described how Pfizer told them a settlement had been reached, while expressing concerns that Nigerian officials wanted it in one lump-sum payment.

The cable outlines how Enrico Liggeri, Pfizer's country manager, said the company wasn't happy settling the case, but that its legal fees ran more than \$15 million a year during the case. Liggeri also said the company hired investigators to probe Aondoakaa, who served as attorney

general under late President Umaru Yar'Adua.

"Pfizer had hired investigators to uncover corruption links to Federal Attorney General Michael Aondoakaa to expose him and put pressure on him to drop the federal cases," the cable reads. It added: "Liggeri contended that Pfizer had much more damaging information on Aondoakaa and that Aondoakaa's cronies were pressuring him to drop the suit for fear of further negative articles."

Aondoakaa told The Associated Press on Friday he knew nothing about Pfizer's attempts to investigate him.

"If they were doing it behind my back, it's very unfortunate," he said.

Aondoakaa has been a polarizing figure in Nigeria since Yar'Adua's long illness that led to his death. As attorney general, Aondoakaa serve argued that Yar'Adua could serve as Nigeria's leader from anywhere, though another leaked cable from WikiLeaks suggests the late president was in a "semi-comatose" state during at least part of his illness.

Aondoakaa had his right to practice law suspended in October over corruption allegations. Another WikiLeaks cable outlined how Royal Dutch Shell PLC's former country manager told U.S. diplomats that an associate told her Aondoakaa said he'd only sign a contract "if the visitor paid \$2 million immediately and another \$18 million the next day." Aondoakaa dismissed that allegation as "rubbish."

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