

Epstein's accusers press to reopen sex abuse case

By CURT ANDERSON
The Associated Press

MIAMI — Nearly a decade ago, wealthy financial guru Jeffrey Epstein came under FBI investigation, suspected of sexually abusing dozens of underage girls at his Palm Beach mansion. Then, abruptly, the investigation was dropped and Jeffrey Epstein pleaded guilty to a single state charge of soliciting prostitution. He served just over a year in jail.



Jeffrey Epstein

Now, two women who say they were among his victims have won a precedent-setting appeals court ruling entitling them to see all the documents from the plea bargain discussions between Epstein's high-powered lawyers and federal prosecutors.

Their goal: use those files to undo the agreement, reopen the investigation, and subject Epstein to more charges.

The women's lawyers contend Epstein got special treatment because of his wealth and connections. His attorneys deny that.

Virgin Islands first lady Cecile deJongh is the manager of Financial Trust Co., a financial services company owned by Epstein. She has also worked with his charitable foundation, the J. Epstein Virgin Islands Foundation.

Epstein owns one of the territory's largest residential estates, the 68.7-acre Little St. James Island.

Epstein, 61, made hundreds of millions of dollars managing funds for rich clients. Shortly after his 2008 guilty plea, it came to light that his lawyers had secretly reached a non-prosecution agreement months earlier with the U.S. Justice Department that spared him a potentially heavier punishment.

"Our complaint alleges that, prod-

ded by Epstein, the federal prosecutors deliberately concealed the sweetheart plea deal they made with him to avoid public criticism," said Paul Cassell, a University of Utah law professor who is representing the two women.

The U.S. attorney's office in Miami would not comment. But the U.S. attorney at the time, R. Alexander Acosta, said in a 2011 letter defending his office that more evidence came to light after Epstein made his deal.

"Many victims have spoken out, filing detailed statements in civil cases seeking damages. Physical evidence has been discovered," Acosta wrote. "Had these additional statements and evidence been known, the outcome may have been different."

Epstein has settled lawsuits for undisclosed amounts with many of the women who say they were underage when they were paid for sex.

The case represents the first time a federal appeals court has ruled that the Crime Victims' Rights Act of 2004 guarantees victims the right to be informed about the details of how a plea bargain was reached, according to legal experts and lawyers involved in the case. The law marked the culmination of efforts begun in the 1960s to give crime victims more of a say.

"I hope that the case will ultimately set an important precedent that federal prosecutors can't keep victims in the dark about the plea deals that they reach," Cassell said.

Epstein served 13 months of an 18-month sentence on the prostitution charge, sold his Palm Beach home in 2011 and now divides his time between a New York City home, Little St. James island and an apartment in Paris, according to court documents. He also has a large New Mexico ranch.

He donates huge sums each year, particularly toward projects involving new medical treatments and artificial intelligence. His foundation established a Harvard University program that uses mathematics to

study evolutionary biology, viruses and disease.

According to lawsuits filed by some of his accusers, Epstein relied on assistants to recruit underage girls to give him massages and perform sex acts. They were usually paid about \$200.

Some girls were notified about the investigation beginning in 2006. But they weren't told about the negotiations with federal prosecutors for at least nine months, despite a requirement in the Crime Victims' Rights Act that they be kept informed. The two women — who were 13 and 14 when the alleged assaults occurred — sued for the files and won.

"Although plea negotiations are vital to the functioning of the criminal justice system, a prosecutor and target of a criminal prosecution do not enjoy a relationship of confidence and trust when they negotiate," the appeals court said.

Federal prosecutors have begun turning over the documents.

Epstein's attorney, Roy Black, the celebrity lawyer who is also representing Justin Bieber in his DUI and resisting-arrest case in Miami Beach, declined to comment but has asked that the documents be kept from public view, and so far they have been.

In a May 23 court filing, Black said that there was no conspiracy between prosecutors and Epstein's team to violate the victims' rights law and that the non-prosecution agreement contained many provisions Epstein strongly opposed, such as registering as a sex offender and agreeing not to contest certain lawsuits.

"This was no sweetheart deal by any stretch of the imagination," Black said in court papers.

Even if a judge invalidates the plea deal, it will still be up to federal prosecutors to decide what to do.

"The court can't force the prosecutors to bring charges," said Matt Alexrod, a former federal prosecutor now in private practice in Washington.