

OLAF concludes investigation into activities of NGO providing emergency assistance in Syria

The conflicts in Syria have created an overwhelming and enduring humanitarian crisis. Millions of people are in need of medical and food aid, water and shelter. As a result, the EU stepped up its efforts as a leading donor, providing emergency assistance to those most in need. OLAF quickly acted upon reports about possible misuse of EU funds destined for these vulnerable persons and opened an investigation. The case was closed recently with recommendation to recover nearly EUR 1,5 million.

In May 2016, OLAF opened an investigation into the activities of a well known non-governmental organisation (NGO), which operates internationally. This NGO was suspected of corruption and manipulation in public procurement procedures that were funded by the EU in order to provide emergency assistance to civilians affected by the conflict in Syria.

The NGO was the beneficiary of four grant agreements awarded by the European Commission's Directorate General for Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection (DG ECHO), and received nearly EUR 19 million in EU funds.

In the search for hard evidence, OLAF performed an on-the-spot check, together with forensic data acquisition, at the NGO's headquarters. As a result, the investigators found evidence of corruption by two former staff members of the NGO. These individuals had set up a sophisticated fraud that was used to siphon taxpayer's money away from the humanitarian crisis in Syria and into their own pockets and those of their collaborators. They also faced accusations from other international bodies in relation to fraud and corruption elsewhere; the two fled Europe and went on the run.

The OLAF investigation also found evidence revealing significant shortcomings in the way that the NGO had administered EU money.

The Director-General of OLAF concluded the investigation in November 2019. He recommended the recovery of EUR 1 462 222 from the NGO.

The two individuals identified by OLAF remain at large for the time being. Given the requirements of investigative secrecy in such matters, OLAF can make no further comment at this stage.

OLAF mission, mandate and competences:

OLAF's mission is to detect, investigate and stop fraud with EU funds.

OLAF fulfils its mission by:

- carrying out independent investigations into fraud and corruption involving EU funds, so as to ensure that all EU taxpayers' money reaches projects that can create jobs and growth in Europe;
- contributing to strengthening citizens' trust in the EU Institutions by investigating serious misconduct by EU staff and members of the EU Institutions;
- developing a sound EU anti-fraud policy.

In its independent investigative function, OLAF can investigate matters relating to fraud, corruption and other offences affecting the EU financial interests concerning:

- all EU expenditure: the main spending categories are Structural Funds, agricultural policy and rural development funds, direct expenditure and external aid;
- some areas of EU revenue, mainly customs duties;
- suspicions of serious misconduct by EU staff and members of the EU institutions.

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