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NY senator charged with fraud over charity funds

Wed Dec 13, 2006 6:54 PM ET

NEW YORK (Reuters) - A New York state senator stole \$423,000 in charity money to pay for indulgences like a Dominican cigar-making company, authorities said on Tuesday as they announced charges against him.

Between 1999 and 2005 Efrain Gonzalez Jr., 58, directed the state legislature to send grant monies to a Bronx charity, where a friend redirected the funds to a shell charity that was the senator's "conduit for paying personal expenses," the U.S. attorney's office said.

Gonzalez used the money to pay for New York Yankees tickets, jewelry, his daughter's college tuition, clothing, a cigar company in the Dominican Republic as well as member fees to a resort and rent for a luxury apartment there.

In August, Gonzalez pleaded not guilty to spending \$37,000 meant for the West Bronx Neighborhood Association Inc., which was nothing more than a room connected to the senator's Bronx district office.

The superseding indictment announced Tuesday also charges three of the Gonzalez' friends with being part of the scheme.

Gonzalez has been charged with mail fraud, wire fraud, theft of federal funds, conspiracy and money laundering. If convicted, Gonzalez, a native of Puerto Rico who was elected to the senate in 1989, faces a maximum of 130 years in prison.

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