

InterContinental Hotels Drops Out Of Sex-Trafficking Suit

By **Joyce Hanson**

Law360 (June 23, 2021, 8:03 PM EDT) -- An anonymous accuser has dismissed United Kingdom-based InterContinental Hotels Group PLC from her sex-trafficking lawsuit against a slew of hotels in Ohio federal court as the parties hash out discovery and a trial schedule in the long-running case.

The sex-trafficking survivor — who is proceeding anonymously and is identified by her initials, M.A. — on Monday voluntarily dismissed without prejudice all claims against InterContinental, whose global headquarters are located in Denham, Buckinghamshire, in the UK. InterContinental is the parent company of Georgia-based subsidiaries Six Continents Hotels Inc. and Holiday Hospitality Franchising LLC, which are still named in the suit.

M.A.'s suit requests a jury trial against 13 name-brand and local hotel defendants and seeks to hold the hotels liable via civil remedies available under the federal Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act. The suit asks for an award of compensatory and punitive damages to M.A. for injuries and damages she allegedly suffered due to the hotel defendants' misconduct.

"The plaintiff requests that the jury award damages to her in an amount which will adequately reflect the enormity of the defendants' wrongdoing and which will effectively prevent other similar bad acts," according to the most recent complaint, filed Feb. 23.

M.A. claimed that the branded hotels where she was trafficked, including the InterContinental defendants' properties, demonstrated "willful blindness to the rampant culture of sex trafficking" that occurred on their premises and failed to train staff on the warning signs of human trafficking or implement policies and procedures to prevent it.

Specifically, the InterContinental-branded Crowne Plaza Columbus Downtown "knew or should have known that pimps and sex traffickers utilize hotels in Columbus, Ohio, including Crowne Plaza hotels, to facilitate the trafficking of women and children for sex," M.A. alleged.

The 13 name-brand and local hotel co-defendants now named in the suit are InterContinental subsidiaries Six Continents Hotels Inc. and Holiday Hospitality Franchising LLC, as well as Wyndham Hotels & Resorts Inc., Choice Hotels International Inc., S&S Airport Motel LLC, First Hotel Management LLC, Brice Hotel Inc., MGH Hospitality Ltd., Krrish Lodging LLC, Columbus Hospitality LLC, Ash Management Corp., Dream Land Hotels LLC and Buckeye Hospitality Inc.

In an April 23 notice, M.A. said she consented to a filing by Six Continents and Holiday Hospitality Franchising, saying they want leave to add as a party Boulevard Inn LLC, which is the franchisee and owner of the Crowne Plaza hotel during the period at issue in the suit.

In the case initiated by M.A. in March 2019, **U.S. District Judge Algenon L. Marbley ruled in October 2019** that the operators of six hotel companies must face her claims that they should have known she was being victimized, saying she had shown enough to allege the hotels benefited financially from the trafficking.

Judge Marbley at the time denied motions to dismiss from Buckeye, Choice, First Hotel, Columbus, Krrish and Wyndham. The judge rejected their arguments that M.A. had not shown that the hoteliers knowingly benefited financially from the sex trafficking happening on their premises or that they should have known what was going on.

On Dec. 14, M.A. moved to amend the complaint, naming 14 hospitality entities, including Ash Management's Days Inn by Wyndham-Columbus North hotel, five other Days Inn by Wyndham hotels, a Comfort Inn hotel, a Super 8 hotel and the InterContinental Hotels Group-branded Crowne Plaza hotel. Judge Marbley granted the motion on Feb. 23.

M.A. claims she was trafficked for sex through force, fraud and coercion from spring 2014, when she was a minor, until she escaped in August 2015. She alleged that the trafficking happened at the Days Inn, Comfort Inn, Super 8 and Crowne Plaza locations in Columbus, Ohio.

M.A. said the hotels knew or should have known the trafficking was happening on their properties because her trafficker asked for rooms near exits and refused housekeeping, and the trash cans in her rooms contained an "extraordinary number of used condoms," according to the amended complaint.

"As a direct and proximate result of the Wyndham, [InterContinental] and Choice brand managers and their hotel brands' consistent refusals to prevent human trafficking on their hotel properties, M.A. was sex trafficked, sexually exploited, and victimized repeatedly at Wyndham, [InterContinental] and Choice brand hotels," the complaint said.

Representatives for M.A. and InterContinental were not available for comment Wednesday.

M.A. is represented by Steven C. Babin Jr. of Babin Law LLC, Kimberly L. Adams, Kathryn L. Avila and Christopher V. Tisi of Levin Papantonio Thomas Mitchell Rafferty & Proctor PA, Gregory M. Zarzaur of the Zarzaur Law Firm and Anil A. Mujumdar of Dagney Johnson Law Group.

Six Continents Hotels is represented by Patrick Kasson and Steven A. Chang of Reminger Co. LPA and John M. Hamrick and William N. Shepherd of Holland & Knight LLP.

The suit is M.A. v. Wyndham Hotels & Resorts Inc. et al., case number 2:19-cv-00849, in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Ohio.

--Additional reporting by Lauren Berg. Editing by Jay Jackson Jr.

Correction: A previous version of this article incorrectly stated that IHG was voluntarily dismissed with prejudice. The error has been corrected, and the article now says IHG was voluntarily dismissed without prejudice.