

Trio on trial for cheating Seminoles

Allegedly took \$2.77 million

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The federal trial of three former Seminole Tribe of Florida employees charged with embezzling almost \$3 million in tribal gambling revenue started Monday with both sides alleging conspiracies.

The trial promises to shed considerable light on the tribe's fabulously profitable gambling enterprises, which include a network of casinos across Florida.

Ousted tribal general manager Tim Cox is on trial, charged with seeding up an allegedly unauthorized online gaming operation with co-defendants Dan Wisher, a computer consultant, and Michael Crumpton, Wisher's son-in-law.

During Monday's opening statements in a Fort Lauderdale federal courtroom, prosecutors painted the

Trio on trial for defrauding Seminoles

► TRIAL, FROM 1B

three defendants as outsiders — none is a tribal member, although Cox is married to a Seminole — involved in a covert scheme to bilk the tribe of \$2.77 million. They said the trio used checks and wire transfers funneled through various bank accounts stretching from Belize and Nicaragua to Delaware.

But lawyers for the accused — who face between 90 and 115 years in jail if convicted of all charges — argued that the transactions were approved by Chief James Billie, the longtime tribal chairman suspended last year amid questions about the Seminoles' finances.

Cox's lawyer, Kenneth Lipman, argued that the money in question was relatively paltry compared to the more than \$300 million a year the tribe generates through gambling. He dismissed the \$2.77 million as "three days of work."

The three men, each with his own attorney, even though they are being tried collectively, are accused of a slew of

charges relating to conspiracy and money laundering.

The trial, before U.S. District Judge William P. Dimitrouleas, is expected to last about a week, with the government calling witnesses ranging from bank officials to tribal members.

The indictment charges that in the spring of 2000, Cox signed and issued checks totaling \$2.77 million from tribal accounts to an entity called Virtual Data Ltd. Wisher is listed as president of Virtual Data, Cox as vice president, and Crumpton as secretary.

The men allegedly divided the money among themselves, in part through wire transfers to a company called Global Solutions set up by Wisher in Belize and another company called Information Solutions & Systems, set up in Delaware by Wisher and Crumpton. The three men then allegedly tried to cover their trail by drawing up fake invoices from Virtual Data to the tribe.

Prosecutor Edward Stamm said the trio did not use proper checks and balances and kept tribal council members in the

dark about the transactions.

The defense argued that Billie, longtime leader of the tribe, wanted to start an Internet gaming empire but had concerns that it would run afoul of U.S. law. He allegedly told the three to start the business overseas and to do it quietly "to not jeopardize the tribe's gaming license," Lipman said.

Lipman urged jurors to remember that the Seminoles have their own unique culture and way of doing business.

"It's a culture of hunters," he said, adding: "These are people to whom rules mean nothing."

Lipman asserted that the three defendants are being charged because they refused to help the federal government build a case against Billie.

Among the people expected to testify for the prosecution are the treasurer for the tribe, various bank officials, and Jim Shore, the longtime general counsel for the tribe who was shot and seriously wounded in January in a crime that remains unsolved.