

Wife ordered to pay fees in \$400M case

Galveston court rules divorce filing 'forum shopping'

By Maggie Gordon

The judge overseeing a \$400 million divorce case in Galveston County on Tuesday ordered a sanction against the wife in the case, Winnie Stacey Alwazzan. The move holds her responsible for paying more than \$200,000 in legal fees for the attorneys who represent her estranged husband, Isa Alwazzan, and his family's company.

In its findings, the court ruled that Winnie "never established residence in Galveston County at any time before January 2015," and that her filing in that county "constituted impermissible forum shopping, which was done in bad faith for the improper purpose of attempting to bring the same claims against the same parties in a different County for a different result, after a final trial on the merits was held and adjudicated in Harris County."

No jurisdiction to rule

Winnie and Isa, who'd lived in Montgomery County, first brought their divorce to a court there. In November 2011, the Alwazzans signed a mediated divorce settlement, agreeing that Isa would pay a lump sum of \$168,000 into a trust and provide \$3,500 a month in child support. His interest in his family company, International Agencies Co. Ltd. — or Intercol — which Winnie says is worth about \$5 billion, wasn't addressed. Winnie's lawyer, Jared Woodfill, asked the court "nonsuit," or cancel, that settlement, arguing that it only addressed half the case.

Then Woodfill filed a new divorce claim in Harris County, where he says Winnie had recently moved. She was awarded \$3.4 million, plus property. But only Isa was held liable, not Intercol; Woodfill says he erroneously used the wrong address for notifying Intercol.

They nonsuited again, filing in Galveston, where Woodfill and Winnie Al-



Winnie Alwazzan



Isa Alwazzan

condo. In June 2014, she was awarded a \$416 million settlement, in which Intercol and Isa Alwazzan were held jointly liable.

That was overturned. Because of the mediated settlement agreement in Montgomery County, the Galveston court said it did not have jurisdiction to rule.

In early October, Intercol's lawyers motioned to sanction Winnie's legal team, asking for repayment of more than \$700,000 in attorney fees.

'Continue to fight'

Tuesday, though the court ruled in Intercol's favor, but awarded a smaller amount: Winnie is ordered to pay \$100,000 to Intercol and \$50,000 to Isa for this lawsuit, with additional fees should any be awarded in post-judgment actions, reviews or appeals.

"We respectfully disagree with this opinion," Woodfill said Tuesday afternoon. "It's one judge's opinion, and we'll continue to fight this."

He has already filed an appeal on the dismissal of the divorce, and plans to appeal the sanctions as well. That could come at an added cost; the judge's ruling also orders that Winnie would have to pay \$85,000 to both Isa and Intercol's legal teams for any appeals in the court of appeals.

"The judge also tried to tack on another \$85,000 with the appeals, and we don't believe you can do that," Woodfill says. "We think that's inconsistent with the law."

Kathleen Collins, an attorney for Intercol, said Tuesday that her team wasn't surprised that Winnie's side continues to fight.

"It's exactly what they've done throughout this process, beginning in Montgomery County," she said. "From their past actions, I fully expect to see this to go to the Supreme Court — I don't see them stopping."