

Name: Alert ID: TMML2024036556325 PARIS (Reuters) - Lamine Diack, once one of the most powerful people in athletics, was convicted in France on Wednesday of running a clique that covered up Russian doping in return for bribes worth millions of dollars and sentenced to spend at least two years in jail. The 87-year-old former head of world athletics' governing body was found guilty of taking kickbacks from athletes in return for concealing positive drug tests, which enabled them to continue competing, including at the 2012 London Olympics. The court had heard how Diack solicited bribes totalling 3.45 million euros (\$4.1 million) and paid off other officials at the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) to aid with the cover up. He was also guilty of accepting Russian money to help finance Macky Sall's 2012 presidential campaign in Senegal, Diack's home country, the court ruled. The former long-jumper's actions had "undermined the values of athletics and the fight against doping", the presiding judge said. The court handed Diack a four-year prison sentence, two years of which are suspended and a fine of 500,000 euros. It also ordered him to pay 5 million euros in damages to World Athletics (formerly IAAF) together with his son and co-accused, Papa Massata Diack. Lamine Diack's lawyers said he was a scapegoat "sacrificed in the name of political correctness", adding they would appeal the judgment which was unfair and inhumane. He will remain under house arrest pending the appeal, which could last months.

WIDENING GRAFT PROBE Diack led the IAAF from 1999 to 2015. In his testimony, he acknowledged slowing the handling of Russian doping cases between 2011-2013 to save a sponsorship deal with a Russian bank and avoid public scandal. But he denied the corruption allegations. At the heart of the corruption scam alongside Diack was his son, Papa Massata. Papa Massata, who fled France to Senegal after the French investigation began and was tried in absentia, was sentenced to five years in jail and hit with a 1 million euro fine. Papa Massata's lawyers in Senegal said he was denied a fair trial and would appeal. At the outset of the trial, his Senegal-based lawyers asked that it be postponed on the grounds that COVID-19 restrictions meant they could not travel, yet the request was refused by the French judges. French Investigators say Papa Massata is at the centre of years-long corruption probe that now spans Europe, Asia and the Americas, and includes the awarding of the 2020 Olympic Games to Tokyo and the 2016 Games to Rio de Janeiro. In 2017, Papa Massata branded the accusation that he was part of a large corruption racket as "the biggest lie in the history of world sport." Four other defendants were charged in the case: Habib Cisse, Diack's former lawyer at the IAAF; Gabriel Dollé, who oversaw doping tests at the IAAF; former head of Russian athletics Valentin Balakhnichev, and former Russian athletics' head coach Alexei Melnikov. All four were found guilty of corruption offences. Balakhnichev, who also did not attend the hearing, told Reuters he too would appeal. "I don't live in France," he said. "We have our own laws in Russia that protect Russian citizens." (\$1 = 0.8425 euros)