

# Money mule gets 6 years' jail for laundering \$5m

Singaporean woman became part of classic Nigerian get-rich-easy scam

By KHUSHWANT SINGH

ALL she had to do was receive another person's money in her bank accounts and pass it to associates – for which she would get up to \$5,000 in commission for each transaction.

Singaporean Nordiah Bakar par-

ticipated in the classic Nigerian get-rich-easy scam. For helping to launder \$5 million, she was yesterday jailed for six years – the longest prison term ever imposed here on a money mule.

The \$5 million figure is the highest money laundering amount anyone here has been convicted of so far.

In 2012, Nordiah, 48, who was then operating a trading business, got to know Nigerian Alex Otumba in Johor Baru through a mutual friend. She was then told of another Nigerian, identified only as Mr Joseph.

The men – who are now at large – persuaded her to let them put money in her accounts.

Between July 19 and August 24 of that year, about \$5 million went into her accounts and those of her foster sister Zarina Othman, 48, and her brother-in-law

Zamali Jais, 60. The money was found to be fraudulently transferred from a Bahamas-based trust fund from the Gonet Bank and Trust.

Nordiah would withdraw the money and hand it over to people sent by the Nigerians.

On Monday, she pleaded guilty to 13 offences including receiving stolen property, acquiring or transferring benefits of criminal conduct and removing criminal proceeds out of jurisdiction.

Deputy Public Prosecutor Mu-



**Nordiah Bakar, 48, pleaded guilty to 13 offences including receiving stolen property, and acquiring or transferring benefits of criminal conduct.**

hamad Imaduddin asked for at least six years' jail because of the large amount of money involved.

He noted that Nordiah recruited family members and made no restitution.

Defence counsel Ismail Hamid asked for a sentence of not more than three years, saying that while the overall amount was huge, his client only benefited by \$24,000. He said: "She was naive. She had been exploited by the Nigerians." However, District Judge Liew Thiam Leng said that a deterrent sentence was appropriate, citing the substantial number of transactions Nordiah carried out and the role she played.

Nordiah, now a shop assistant, could have been fined up to \$500,000 and jailed up to seven years just for each of the four offences of acquiring or transferring benefits of criminal conduct. Ms Zarina and Mr Zamali have not been charged.

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## 'Extinct' orchid resurfaces in Bukit Timah reserve

AN ORCHID species thought to be extinct in Singapore has been found in the Bukit Timah Nature Reserve after more than 80 years.

Researchers from Singapore and the Netherlands found a single specimen of the *Vrydagzynea lancifolia* – named for its lance-like leaves – growing on a rock in the reserve last October. Their discovery was detailed in a paper last week in the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research's online journal Nature In Singapore.

A sample of the orchid was first collected in 1889 in Bukit Timah and its last appearance was in the same area, in 1931. In Singapore, it has been recorded only in Bukit Timah and Seletar.

Previous researchers had attributed the native orchid's loss to a reduction in natural forest habitats caused by land use changes.

Of the 226 native species of wild orchids, only 55 remained as of last March. Some specimens of species that are extinct in the wild can be found at the Singapore Botanic Gardens.

The researchers who found the orchid want the species to be declared critically endangered here in the upcoming edition of the Singapore Red Data Book, which lists threatened wildlife.

They added that since only a single plant was found, and it was not fruiting, there should be an extensive survey of the Bukit Timah and Central Catchment nature reserves to look for other mature individuals that can be used for its propagation.

Two weeks after the plant was found, another group of researchers from the Singapore Botanic Gardens combed the area near it



**The single specimen of the *Vrydagzynea lancifolia* orchid species – named for its lance-like leaves – found at Bukit Timah Nature Reserve. PHOTO: REUBEN LIM**

but found no other specimens.

Mr Reuben Lim, 25, a research assistant at the National University of Singapore (NUS) Department of Biological Sciences' Botany Laboratory, said the team was originally looking for another type of plant. The researchers were from NUS, National Parks Board, the Singapore Botanic Gardens, the NUS High School of Mathematics and Science, and the Naturalis Biodiversity Centre in the Netherlands.

The team also said in the paper that the orchid's rediscovery underscored the need to preserve the Bukit Timah Nature Reserve, which was established in 1883 and became legally protected in 1951.

"Despite the many pressures and disturbances it has undergone, it still supports an immensely rich flora... Various species thought to be extinct are likely to still persist in this refuge," the paper said.

FENG ZENGKUN

### CITY HARVEST CASE

## Mystery report suggests authorities alerted in 2005

By FENG ZENGKUN

A MYSTERY report mentioned for the first time in court yesterday suggests that City Harvest Church had come under the authorities' radar as early as 2005.

That is several years before founder Kong Hee and five other members of the mega-church allegedly funnelled millions in church funds through bogus deals – the subject of the current trial – to either finance the pop music career of his wife Ho Yeow Sun or to cover this up.

Prosecution witness Kevin Han, who has led the Commercial Affairs Department's (CAD) investigation into these transactions since April 2010, said a first information report related to the criminal charges was filed in 2005.

He had explained earlier that such reports are "the first instance when the police receive information about a possible crime".

When defence lawyer Michael Khoo tried to clarify whether the 2005 report had "anything to do with the charges the accused are facing today", which are related to transactions that took place between 2007 and 2009, Deputy Public Prosecutor Mavis Chionh interrupted. She said that under the Evidence Act, investigating officers could not be asked about their sources of information.

As Ms Chionh offered to show the report to the judge to explain



**Mr Kevin Han, who has led the Commercial Affairs Department's probe, said a first information report related to the criminal charges was filed in 2005. ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN**

why it could not be disclosed publicly in court, Mr Khoo said: "I'm astounded that the prosecution is offering to show your Honour reports which the defence will not be seeing."

But Ms Chionh insisted that there was "no big sinister secret".

Instead, the report detailed suspicious transactions highlighted by financial institutions, she explained. She also reiterated

how the law protects informers by not disclosing during trial their identity or the information they gave.

Senior District Judge See Kee Oon said he would hear from both sides on the matter today.

Earlier yesterday, defence lawyer Edwin Tong suggested that CAD's Mr Han and his team had not been thorough when seizing documents relevant to the trial, which began last May.

They had not, for example, taken auditing firm Baker Tilly's work papers related to its special audit of City Harvest in 2003, after a church member raised allegations about the misuse of church funds. They also had not seized any of the accounting firm's electronic storage devices such as hard discs.

Mr Tong alleged this was done on purpose.

Objecting to this as "gratuitous and baseless", Ms Chionh asked whether he intended to make the "serious allegation" that the CAD investigation was biased to an extent that how it did its work was affected.

Mr Tong said there was "no present intention" to do so.

Ms Chionh repeatedly pointed out that if there was useful evidence that had not been seized, Mr Tong could apply to the court to have it produced. "But if he is not making the application... then I take it that he is unable to show why the item of evidence is necessary or desirable for the purposes of this trial."

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## Trespass: Teacher remains silent during parents' visits

By HOE PEI SHAN

THE parents of the Malaysian teacher who sneaked into Singapore visited their daughter twice last week at the Institute of Mental Health (IMH), but returned to Kedah without even exchanging a word with her.

Nurul Ruhana Ishak, 28, was arrested last Monday, three days after allegedly slipping past immigration officers at the Woodlands Checkpoint by tailgating a car.

Police said last Wednesday that she has been charged with criminal trespass and remanded at IMH for psychiatric assessment, during which visits are typically not allowed.

But The Straits Times understands that the authorities may sometimes consider such requests case by case.

Nurul's father, a rubber tapper, and her stepmother, a cook, first came to Singapore last Thursday to try and visit their daughter.

They were eventually granted access last Saturday afternoon and on Monday morning for about an hour each time, but Nurul did not utter a word to them.

Her worried parents nonetheless "calmed down after seeing her", said Deputy High Commissioner Kamsiah Kamaruddin of the Malaysian High Commission here.

She accompanied the couple, believed to be in their 50s, on their second trip to IMH. They returned to Kedah on Monday afternoon.

"They said it's normal for her not to talk when she's in one of her conditions," Ms Kamsiah said.

Nurul's aunt had earlier told Malaysian paper The Star that her niece had a long history of mental illness,



**Malaysian teacher Nurul Ruhana Ishak's parents said it was normal for her not to talk while in one of her conditions.**

and had to be on medication constantly or would suffer from depression.

She is due back in court next Wednesday, but her family has not yet made plans to be in Singapore for her court appearance, said Ms Kamsiah.

The Straits Times understands that financial difficulties may be keeping Nurul's parents from scheduling further visits.

Meanwhile, the Malaysian authorities are still looking into how Nurul, a teaching graduate from Universiti Sains Malaysia, could have sneaked through the Johor Checkpoint.

No passport or identification was found on her when she was arrested. Investigations into her illegal entry into Singapore are also ongoing.

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