

# One faded note the only lead – but that's enough for CPIB to tackle case

How CPIB solves big crimes with small leads to keep graft cases low in S'pore

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All they had to go on was an allegation about corruption in the sneaker industry, sent by an anonymous whistle-blower from a burner e-mail account in 2020.

Officers from the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) had no way of contacting the sender.

And this was a niche industry CPIB officers knew little of.

Yet, from the single bribery allegation against a shoe reseller, CPIB uncovered an elaborate web of corrupt transactions involving 10 people about when new pairs of limited edition shoes would be released for sale.

Five givers and five receivers were involved, including a shoe reseller who somehow knew the release timings.

Speaking to The Sunday Times on Aug 18, Mr Lam Seow Kin, assistant director of the financial investigation branch at CPIB, said these releases are known as shoe drops. Their timings are often kept secret to prevent scalpers from snapping up all the stock.

Mr Lam said the e-mail claimed the shoe reseller knew the shoe drop timings.

Mr Lam, who joined CPIB in 2012, said: "The e-mail was just a general allegation that this one guy must be doing something, and was thus able to time all the shoe drops and buy all of them for himself."

Without revealing more informa-



Mr Lam Seow Kin, assistant director of the financial investigation branch at the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau, says there have been more bribery cases involving new payment methods such as cryptocurrency recently, so officers have to constantly adapt to keep up with the latest trends. ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH

tion, Mr Lam said he and his team did background checks on this reseller named in the e-mail and scrutinised his lifestyle.

They identified a shoe store employee who had been receiving bribes from the reseller in exchange for shoe drop information.

They found out this employee would give information to the reseller, who bought at least 57 pairs of shoes, either on the first day they were available for sale or a day later.

Mr Lam said CPIB realised other resellers were bribing employees of another shoe store to reveal confidential insider information relating to the launch of limited-edition sneakers.

One employee obtained more than \$12,000 in bribes while another received bribes amounting to over \$5,000.

The five employees were handed conditional warnings, or fines of up to \$30,000.

One of the shoe resellers was

fined \$20,000 while the other four were given conditional warnings.

In 2024, CPIB received 177 reports, of which 61 were made anonymously.

In another case in 2012, all Mr Lam and his team had was a tattered, yellow piece of A4-size paper handed to CPIB by the police, who had found it at an unrelated crime scene.

Not much could be made out from the faded note except for an allegation of a bribery scheme in

the petrochemical industry.

The writer had also written a name of the man allegedly receiving the bribes.

But this name was a common one, said Mr Lam.

It was not stated who wrote the note, who to contact for more information, and no concrete evidence in the note to prove the allegation, he added.

The note claimed the corrupt practices had gone on for about two years.

What Mr Lam and his team discovered was a marketing and sales executive of a petrochemical products company had been accepting bribes of almost \$1 million from a vendor for over 11 years.

The man's job involved recommending a vendor to his management for the transportation of chemicals overseas.

He recommended the vendor he received bribes from, and after the contract was awarded, the vendor continued to pay the man every month.

In 2017, the man was sentenced to 90 weeks' jail and had to pay a penalty of \$1.13 million.

Said Mr Lam: "As we investigated the case, we didn't expect the scale of it to be so large and to span over such a long period of time."

Mr Lam said those involved in the case had also tried to mask their payments by routing them through another company.

In recent years, CPIB has seen more corruption cases involving new payment methods, such as cryptocurrency. This means officers have to constantly adapt to keep up with the latest trends, said Mr Lam.

Besides these challenges, CPIB officers also have to deal with desperate suspects.

Once, a suspect brought in to CPIB for questioning had asked to use the toilet. Inside, he found a toilet brush, broke it in half and turned it into a weapon.

Hiding it in his back pocket as he came out, the suspect tried to stab a CPIB officer, who quickly subdued him.

There are now no toilet brushes in the cubicles at CPIB's headquarters in Lengkok Bahru.

In 2024, CPIB secured a conviction rate of 97 per cent.

That year, Singapore was ranked the least corrupt country in the Asia-Pacific region in global anti-graft watchdog Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index report.

Mr Lam said: "In Singapore, you don't have to worry about needing to grease somebody's palms to get things done."

"We are helping ensure there is a level playing field for everybody. Not just in doing business, but also as you're going about your everyday life."

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