

## Bribery charges eyed

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THE Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions is considering whether federal police have sufficient evidence to lay criminal charges against executives of two Reserve Bank of Australia subsidiaries for bribery.

The revelation that the DPP has been asked to review aspects of the case - involving the RBA banknote companies Securrency and Note Printing Australia - is the strongest indication yet that the probe could lead to Australia's first-ever prosecution for bribery of an overseas official.

But foreign law enforcement officials who are co-operating with the AFP in its investigation have told The Age that it may take months for them to send critical evidence back to Australia under notoriously sluggish mutual assistance treaties.

Legal sources confirmed that the DPP was first consulted about the AFP investigation last year. A federal police spokesperson said the AFP could not comment on an ongoing investigation.

The Age has also uncovered fresh information suggesting that senior officials of Note Printing Australia - which prints the nation's currency - may have been aware of, or participated in, activities that could potentially breach Australian bribery laws.

Documents obtained by The Age indicate that former NPA chief executive John Leckenby was involved in banknote supply and printing deals in at least two Asian countries where the RBA firms paid large commissions to middlemen who are suspected of corruption and bribery to help the Australian companies win banknote supply and printing deals.

Mr Leckenby, who led NPA between 1998 and 2004, was regularly mentioned in correspondence from Jakarta middleman Radius Christanto, who allegedly received \$US3.65 million from the RBA firms after the Indonesian central bank awarded them a lucrative 1999 contract. Attempts by The Age to speak to Mr Leckenby have been unsuccessful.

Securrency owns the rights to the special polymer material used to make plastic bank notes around the world. Note Printing Australia for many years jointly marketed the polymer product with Securrency on the basis that it could offer printing services.

Another NPA deal to supply banknotes to Nepal has also been criticised by company insiders, who have told The Age there were problems with the tender process run by the Nepalese central bank and serious questions about where the commission to the local agent ended up.

The DPP's examination of evidence gathered by the AFP comes as Australia's trade agency admitted its officials helped the corruption-implicated RBA firms seek business in more than 20 countries.

Austrade chief executive Peter Yule told a Senate committee last week that Austrade officers helped Securrency and Note Printing Australia identify potential agents in several countries across Asia and South America as part of a global agreement it had with the RBA firms.

"There would be 20 or more," he said. "We certainly arranged meetings in markets like Pakistan in southern Asia. The main ones in South-East Asia would be Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia."

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It appears the global agreement between Austrade and Securrency enabled executives from the RBA firm to verbally request assistance from trade officials, leaving little or no documentary evidence of what Austrade was asked to do.

Mr Yule was reluctant to answer some questions put to him by shadow attorney-general George Brandis at a hearing of the Senate committee on foreign affairs, defence and trade last Thursday.

He said legal advice to Austrade and the ongoing AFP inquiry placed constraints on how much he could discuss.

Senator Brandis reminded him that the Parliamentary Privileges Act overrode most statutory secrecy provisions.

Mr Yule said Austrade would provide the committee with secret documents regarding the agency's assistance to Securrency, including background checks it conducted on several of the banknote supplier's agents.

He denied that the background checks for Securrency would have included specific warnings about the legality of payments to certain agents.

But he said, "it may contain information that would cause the entity to take further action and make further investigation and inquiries".

Mr Yule said he would have expected Austrade overseas officials to report any suspect illegal activity by Australian companies to head office and the AFP.