

Syndicate accused stand trial

Jenny Denton

ELEVEN of 15 people charged in relation to an alleged large-scale Malaysian drug manufacturing syndicate with links to the Kerang and Robinvale areas have been committed to stand trial in the Victorian County Court.

Two of the alleged ringleaders were refused bail at the committal hearing in the Melbourne Magistrates' Court last week despite delays caused by Covid leaving them likely to face wait of up to three years.

Eng Beng Koh, of Mont Albert, also known as 'Tom', 33, and Yining Tao, of Balwyn, who uses the English name 'Steven', 37, are both charged with trafficking a large commercial quantity of methylamphetamine, possessing precursor chemicals and dealing with the proceeds of crime.

The third alleged ringleader, Mr Koh's partner, Xioyan Ning, 36, a Chinese national who was arrested in Tasmania, was granted bail last year so she could look after the couple's two young children.

Also committed for trial are alleged "money man" Zheng Cai Kuay, from Bannerton, and Wei Yu Boo, of Robinvale.

In opposing Mr Koh's application, prosecutor John Saunders told the court the Malaysian citizen, whose bridging visa had lapsed, posed an unacceptable risk of flight if released because he could apply to be deported from immigration detention.

Questioned by Mr Saunders, Detective Stuart Burnham, from the Clandestine Laboratory Squad, said Mr Koh's alleged offending had been carried out with contacts and assistance from China and around Victoria and that police "highly suspect" the syndicate has hidden money the accused could access.

He alleged members of the group had the ability to create fraudulent identity documents, citing a photo of a forged Victorian drivers licence in Mr Tau's name bearing



Alleged ringleaders were refused bail at the committal hearing in the Melbourne Magistrates' Court last week.

a "merged" photo of Tau and Eng Beng Koh, which he said was found on Ms Ning's phone and had been made with the help of her sister in China.

Det Burnham also referred to an alleged conversation between co-accused Zheng Cai Kuay, from Bannerton, and his wife, Cyrene Liew, about a contact in the Malaysian embassy he claimed could help with false documents and visa information.

He said that conversations between Mr B. Koh and Mr Tau that were intercepted by police caused him to doubt the men would comply with court orders if released.

These included discussions about accusing police of stealing money and finding a lawyer who would "do dodgy things".

Mr Tau's counsel, Diana Price, told the court her client, an Australian citizen with family and business interests in Australia, posed no flight risk and could offer a surety of up to \$170,000, but Mr Saunders argued that the case against Mr Tau, who faces a maximum penalty of life im-

prisonment, was strong and serious.

In his decision to refuse bail Magistrate Reynolds noted "clear indications" in the evidence that "Mr Tau would like to be ahead of law enforcement if that could be achieved".

According to the Crown case, which relies heavily on hours of translated telephone intercept and listening device recordings and We-Chat messages, the syndicate imported chemicals to produce large quantities of methylamphetamine and set up labour hire businesses and chicken and egg farms at Lake Lookout Road, Beauchamp, and Upton Hill, near Seymour, to launder drug money.

The two farms and various bank accounts are subject to restraining orders which stop them being sold or drawn on.

The court heard a forensic accounting report into the various businesses involved in the syndicate was not expected to be completed until April 2022.

The 11 accused will appear in the County Court on September 6.

Former Kerang resident accused of trafficking

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A FORMER Kerang resident has been committed to stand trial in the Victorian County Court on a charge of trafficking methylamphetamine in a large commercial quantity between March 2, 2018 and June 30, 2020.

Eng Kok Koh, 42, is one of 11 accused - including his brother, Eng Beng Koh - who will be tried in relation to what police allege was a large scale methylamphetamine manufacturing operation that was conducted as a joint criminal enterprise.

The Malaysian citizen pleaded not guilty to the charge through an interpreter in the Melbourne Magistrates' Court last week.

Eng Kok Koh, known also by the name 'Sam', was arrested at his rented house in Leng St during a major police operation on June 20 last year.

The operation, which was the culmination of a five-month investigation, saw police raid a series of properties in Robinvale, Bannerton, Truganina, Point Cook, Mont Albert, Balwyn and Tasmania, seizing three tonnes of chemicals, large quantities of cash and several luxury cars, and making a number of arrests.

The court heard that police evidence connected Mr K. Koh with two alleged large-scale meth labs in Tarneit and a third property in Truganina, where rooms had been converted for cannabis cultivation, and where cannabis, chemicals and scientific glassware and apparatus were found.

According to police, his DNA was found on two respirator masks allegedly used in the production of methylamphetamine at one of the Tarneit labs, where 5kg of methylamphetamine and precursor chemicals were found, and on a toothbrush and cigarette butts at the Truganina property.

There was also evidence from surveillance operatives, who tracked his White Holden Crewman utility moving between the properties of other alleged syndicate members and the clandestine labs, and visiting a hydroponic store, where he picked up an item and delivered it to one of the labs.

Mr K. Koh was also mentioned in conversations caught on listening devices and telephone intercepts, including one in which his brother, Eng Beng Koh, told Robinvale accused Zheng Cai Kuay to "go and get the rock sugar from K. Koh".

Prosecutor John Saunders said that when the June 20 warrant was executed on Mr Koh's Leng St house last year, over \$37,000 in cash was found on the premises.

In his initial police interview Eng Kok Koh had denied knowing his brother Eng Beng Koh or co-accused Yining Tao - known as 'Steven', Mr Saunders said.

However, Mr K. Koh's barrister, James Portelli, suggested there had been miscommunication over the name police used for Eng Beng Koh, who was also known as 'Tom'.

Mr Portelli sought the dismissal of all charges against his client, arguing the evidence against him was weak; however Magistrate Duncan Reynolds ruled that while the case against Mr K. Koh was a circumstantial one it was strong enough to potentially convince a jury.

Magistrate Reynolds dismissed several other charges Mr K. Koh was facing relating to trafficking, dealing with the proceeds of crime and possession of precursor chemicals.

Eng Kok Koh, who appeared by video link with his brother from Fulham Correctional Centre near Sale, didn't apply for bail.

He is due to appear with his co-accused in the County Court on September 6.

Clubroom targeted

YOUNG children have been targeted by vandals after they allegedly tried to access a junior football clubroom in Kerang last month.

The incident happened between July 30 and August 2.

"We were annoyed that people continuously try to do things like that around the town," Kerang Football Netball Club junior football club president Paul Meehan said.

Mr Meehan said the damage to the clubroom was minimal.

"They took the mesh grate off the window and they removed about half-a-dozen glass louvers, but there were more bars so they couldn't access the actual club," he said.

If you have any information relating to the incident, contact Kerang police on 5452 1955.

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