

Official in crime gang link

EXCLUSIVE
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A SENIOR government boss with links to a major Melbourne-based underworld crime gang has been accused of serious bribery and dishonesty offences.

The high-ranking Commonwealth public official faced Melbourne Magistrates' Court yesterday on nine charges relating to his role overseeing the inspection of items, including shipping containers, through customs.

It is believed the charges

relate to the importation of illegal cigarettes.

The court heard the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources acting assistant director had a relationship with a "serious underworld crime organisation" and had received threats.

His name was suppressed in the courts due to claims his safety could be at risk.

The male staffer, 37, was arrested last week as part of an extensive two-year investiga-

tion involving federal and state police and customs authorities.

It is believed the investigation relates to the provision of information about the status of shipping containers.

Charge sheets reveal his alleged offending occurred in Yarraville between November 5 and December 22 last year.

The charges include allegations he dishonestly obtained a benefit for himself and communicated information or documents he had as a public

official and had a duty not to disclose.

The man is also facing serious allegations he took a bribe from an undercover operative.

It is believed the alleged bribe amounted to several thousand dollars.

The court heard 30 computers and intercepted telephone calls form part of the case against the official.

His lawyer, George Balot, told the court the man had underworld connections and

Government boss accused of bribery, dishonesty

disclosure of his identity could jeopardise his safety. The *Herald Sun* believes the accused is linked to a prominent Middle Eastern crime family.

"Those involved in the organised crime group have been previously known to shut down potential witnesses," Mr Balot said.

He has received threats by these people. "They are very high up in the organised crime world," he said.

"I wouldn't know a person

in the state that wouldn't know this family."

The prosecution told the court the official's connection to an underworld crime group was known to authorities and was being monitored.

Last week, two men of Lebanese heritage were charged with importing 1.1 million cigarettes, which were declared as black tea at Melbourne airport.

The massive haul was worth more than \$10 million in evaded revenue.

The matter will return to court on April 10.

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