

Seven ex-Citibankers charged with stealing client information

Under Computer Misuse Act, they could face up to 20 years in jail, fine up to \$125,000

By **CONRAD RAJ**

[SINGAPORE] In an unprecedented action, seven former Citibankers were hauled into court yesterday to face a combined total of 1,223 charges, largely for stealing clients' information before joining rival banks and thereby allegedly violating sections of the Computer Misuse Act.

The charges are said to have arisen from a complaint filed by Citibank with the police and the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) after six of the seven defected from the bank in mid-2006 to join rival banks, including Switzerland's UBS Bank. All seven had been servicing high net worth clients

with Citibank, with investments ranging from a few hundred thousand dollars to over \$10 million.

Citibank had earlier taken out civil proceedings against several of the seven charged, for having sent or taken confidential information via their computers.

The US bank had in its suits alleged that some of the bankers had urged their rich clients to jump ship, taking about S\$50 million of business to UBS.

Those now charged in court include former Citibank branch manager Jonathan Seah, 44, and six others. They are former relationship managers Carel Low Siok Liang, 33; Wendy Quek Lien Lien, 30; Jelene Lee Kit Peng, 34; Esther Lim Siew May, 31; and Lydia Koh Meng Yang, 28. Each of them faces between three and 264 charges. Also charged was Low's assistant, service rela-

tionship manager Valarie Lim Ming Huey.

They are alleged to have either accessed Citibank's computers without authorisation to get information or sent files containing customer information to email addresses outside the company.

As some of the charges are under the enhanced provisions of the Computer Misuse Act, those so charged could face up to 20 years in prison and/or a fine of up to \$125,000.

Several of the charges were under the Banking Act, while one of the accused was charged with destroying evidence. They are said to have acted in three separate groups independently of each other.

While the names of some of Citibank's clients were said to have appeared on the charge sheets, the court ordered that they not be made public.

Seah, who was one of those who joined UBS in 2006, is said to have left the Swiss bank the same year for undisclosed reasons. He had been accused by Citibank of having sent confidential information, including details of customers and their investments, an organisational chart of the bank and personal appraisals of at least seven staff, to his personal email address.

The bank had said that Seah had breached his contract and pointed out that the majority of the emails were sent a day before his resignation, the day itself and the day after.

Esther Lim was accused by Citibank of forwarding confidential customer information to Seah including names, addresses, contact numbers, the value of assets and breakdown of investments before she left the bank.

According to a Citibank spokesman, all the civil suits were "favourably" settled during the course of last year. The accused were said to have compensated the bank.

When it filed the civil suits, Citibank had said: "The privacy of customer, proprietary or confidential information is one of our highest priorities. We will always act to protect the privacy of such information."

UBS, three of whose employees (Wendy Quek, Jelene Lee and Lydia Koh) were among the seven charged yesterday, is said to have placed the three under suspension pending the outcome of the case.

A spokeswoman said: "It is not appropriate for us to comment on this as it is a personal matter between the individuals and the authorities."

The unprecedented action by the authorities may put a curb on poaching of private bankers and others, especially professionals like lawyers, observers said.