

Macao official in court over USD 100m casino bribes

A former senior Macao official was accused in court yesterday of taking USD 100m in kickbacks related to the recent boom in casino construction.

Ao Man-long, former secretary for transport and public works, is the territory's highest-ranking official ever to be charged with graft. He faces 76 charges of taking bribes, money-laundering and abuse of power, which allegedly resulted in him and his wife earning 57 times the income their jobs should have netted them over a seven-year period.

Mr Ao's arrest last December, and his high-profile trial, have cast a shadow over the former Portuguese colony's attempts to improve its long-held image as a backwater haven for organised crime.

According to government charges read out in court, Mr Ao is accused of speeding up government approval for construction companies involved in hotel and casino construction, including that of the world's largest casino, the USD 2.4bn (GBP 1.15bn, EUR 1.65bn) Venetian Macau, which opened in August, news agencies said.

Mr Ao yesterday declined to enter a plea, calling the charges „confusing“.

His trial is a political blow for Macao's chief executive, Edmund Ho, who appointed Mr Ao.

Mr Ho was once feted for improving Macao's public safety and sparking its economic boom by breaking up the city's gaming monopoly in 2002. This resulted in Macao last year overtaking Las Vegas as the world's largest gaming market by revenues, and new developments such as the Venetian Macao are seeking to

transform the city from purely a gamblers' paradise into a convention and family holiday destination.

Recently, however, Mr Ho has been dogged by growing discontent among those left behind by the casino boom, even with the territory's economy growing by 17 per cent last year.

Mr Ao, whose policy portfolio included responsibility for approving lucrative public works contracts and allocating land to property developers and contractors, presided over much of the physical change to Macao's cityscape. Besides allegedly taking bribes from contractors to speed up government approvals, Mr Ao is also said to have demanded a 3 per cent introduction fee for recommending companies to western developers. The trial is expected to last a month and involve about 100 witnesses.

Ng Kuok-cheung, Macao legislator and a long-time critic of government land policy, said yesterday's charges skirted the central issue: Macao's opaque land sales system, which he said allows developers to pay below market prices and creates opportunities for abuse.

While Macao had benefited from a prolonged economic expansion following its return to Chinese rule in 1999, it now faced a new set of challenges, he said.

„The two biggest problems then were economic recession and public safety because of organised crime. So it is better [now]. It's just that the benefits have been siphoned off by corruption.“