

**Zahid didn't vouch for underworld kingpin, says Umno lawyer**  
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**BY LEE SHI-IAN**

Home Minister Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi did not vouch for accused gambling kingpin Paul Phua Wei Seng as his letter was merely a response to Phua's lawyer, said Tan Sri Muhammad Shafee Abdullah.

The Umno lawyer revealed that in August last year, his firm was engaged by Chesnoff & Schonfeld to assist it in a pending criminal case involving Phua and his son, Darren Phua Wai Kit.

Shafee said his legal firm and Chesnoff & Schonfeld wrote a letter to the Home Minister requesting his assistance to share any information directly with the US Federal Bureau of Investigation.

This is because Zahid is in the best position to inquire with the police department to ascertain if Phua is a member of and associated with Hong Kong's 14K Triad.

"I have been in the legal trade for 40 years, I have never heard of the 14K triad," Shafee told a press conference at his office in Jalan Tunku today.

"What Zahid had said is accurate and correct. Phua has also provided assistance to assist various agencies under the Home Ministry in matters of national security and interests."

Phua, a former Macau casino junket operator, was facing illegal sportsbetting charges in Las Vegas after being arrested during last year's FIFA World Cup football.

On New Year's Eve, the South China Morning Post (SCMP) reported that Zahid had sent a letter to the FBI vouching for Phua.

The SCMP also published the contents of the letter, in which Zahid claimed that Phua was not a member of the 14K Triad in Malaysia.

The letter, addressed to FBI deputy director Mark F. Giuliano, claimed that Phua had assisted Putrajaya on projects affecting national security.

Shafee said when the SCMP carried the report on Zahid's letter "vouching" for Phua on Wednesday, his concern was that the story had been slanted.

"The story, including those carried by local media, was slanted as though Zahid had done something to favour a suspect. But he did not vouch for this man's character," Shafee said.

He said Zahid was very aware of his rights and the law pertaining to the revealing of information and national security.

"Zahid is aware of what information he can give and what he cannot," Shafee said, adding that it was not the first time he had asked for information from a home minister.

"The law provides me with the right to know such details, I just cannot divulge the information," Shafee said.

He pointed out that Zahid did not say in his letter whether Phua was innocent or guilty of the gambling offence for which he had been arrested in Las Vegas.

"Zahid found it necessary to correct the perception that Phua was a member of the 14K Triad in Malaysia as the claim against the latter had been vague," he said.

Shafee said Zahid providing such information to the FBI was not an exception, clarifying that he had asked the Home Minister to direct his letter directly to the FBI.

Furthermore, Shafee said, an FBI internal document based on information from the Royal Malaysian Police was inaccurate.

"The RMP has identified the 14K Triad as a local organised crime syndicate involved in illegal drugs, illegal gambling and money laundering activities in Malaysia," stated the internal FBI document dated July 17, 2008.

"The RMP has also identified Malaysian Phua Wei Seng as a 14K Triad member."

Shafee said he had personally contacted high level officers within the police force and received his information from the horse's mouth.

"The 2008 report is wrong, there is no 14K Triad in Malaysia, not even during the era of Ghee Hin and Hai San," Shafee said.

Both Ghee Hin and Hai San are among the two earliest secret societies established in Malaya and Singapore in the 18th century.

"The FBI have got their facts wrong, there is no 14K Triad in Malaysia," Shafee said, adding that Phua's trial had not yet begun and he should be presumed innocent until proven guilty.

He also said that Phua's alleged offence was merely a revenue offence as he was undertaking gambling activities without a licence.

"He did not murder someone. His offence is not a big deal," Shafee said, adding offenders normally received a slap on the wrist with a fine.

"With regard to the issue of national security, of course, I cannot elaborate, nor do I know how Phua assisted the Malaysian government.

"I doubt if Zahid can disclose this either as it concerns national security.

"But what I am authorised to say is that in pursuit of our government's continuous efforts to stay abreast of matters of national security, it does require some civilian participation."

Shafee also said that Chesnoff & Schonfeld was a famous law firm in the United States who regularly represented celebrities, hence Phua's legal team was a strong one.

The 14K Triad is the second largest triad group in the world with around 25,000 members split into 30 sub-groups, according to encyclopaedia website Wikipedia.

Based in Hong Kong, the 14K Triad is also active internationally and are considered the main rivals of Sun Yee On, the largest triad group in the world.

Triads are principally involved in large scale drug trafficking although their income is also derived from illegal activities, such as gambling, money lending, money laundering, vice, human trafficking and extortion.

In January 2014, it was reported that Sun Yee On and 14K had forged ties with Mexico's Sinaloa cartel.

In return for supplying the Mexicans with small arms and raw materials for methamphetamine production, the triads receive cocaine for the Chinese market and access to Sinaloa's network to smuggle Asian nationals into the United States. – January 3, 2015

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