

Ruzana bitter over betrayal that left her behind bars

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KUALA LUMPUR: Ruzana Zubir's emphatic "Saya marah! Marah! Marah!" showed her bitterness despite beating a life sentence on an opium trafficking charge in Sydney.

"I was betrayed by someone I had no reason to distrust, especially after all the favours I had done for him," said Ruzana in a telephone interview from Sydney airport before boarding a plane for Kuala Lumpur.

"Because of him, 13 months of my life is gone. I could have achieved so much during that time. Now I have to start from scratch."

The 36-year-old's outburst was targeted at an Iranian, identified only as Haj, whom she had befriended in Kuala Lumpur three months before she left for Sydney.

Ruzana, a divorced mother of three, said she met him through a mutual friend at a restaurant in Jalan Bukit Bintang. At the time, she was selling cars and computers.

"He was also into computers. He wanted contacts here and I obliged. Initially, he was a client, we soon became business partners and then friends."

Ruzana had joined a group which was on a five-day tour of Sydney and surrounding cities. She paid RM5,500 for the trip. The previous year, she joined a tour group to Japan.

Learning that she was going to Sydney, Haj gave her a package which he claimed contained herbs for a sick friend in Sydney.

"I was naive. I did not check the contents of the package. There was no reason to do so, he was a business associate and a friend."

Ruzana said she had nothing to hide when the authorities stopped her at Sydney airport.

The authorities seized the package and allowed her to carry on with the tour. Ruzana told the authorities of her itinerary and gave them Haj's contact



A relieved Ruzana accompanied by lawyers Palany (left) and Shafee on arrival at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport yesterday. — Picture by Hamsiah Abu Bakar

number.

She was arrested while departing Australia after the tour and charged at the Sydney District Court for trafficking in opium.

But after a week-long trial which ended on Friday, the jury decided she had no knowledge of the contents of the package and set her free.

Haj, meanwhile, was arrested in a drug raid in Setapak last year and charged in the Kuala Lumpur High Court for trafficking. He is now awaiting trial.

"The nightmare has not really ended. There is a stigma attached to me now and I can expect stares from friends and even relatives.

"The court may have set me free but it will take much more to convince the people here of my innocence."

But one thing she learned from the episode is to build a wall around her, to shield her from what she may face. She learnt not to get distracted from her goals but to stay focused.

"The first few weeks at the Windsor Correctional Centre were hell. Then I took up an IT course and concentrated on learning something new.

"The wardens were nice. If you behaved, they were nice and so I did not

have any problems with them.

"I did not mix much with the other prisoners as they were most of the time gossiping about other prisoners and the wardens. I did not want to get involved in that.

"I also exercised regularly and prayed hard that I would be released."

Ruzana was allowed a phone call or two every month and kept in constant contact with her mother.

"Hearing her voice and knowing that she was praying for me kept me going."

Ruzana has a brother here in Kuala Lumpur and he will be taking her back to her hometown in Kangar today to meet her mother and two sisters.

Ruzana's children are staying with her ex-husband.

"I never spoke to my children when I was in prison. I miss them terribly and hope to see them soon."

She singled out her family and her two Malaysian lawyers, Datuk Muhammad Shafee Abdullah and Raj Palany, a Sydney-based solicitor, as the people who never doubted her innocence.

"Shafee and Palany are now part of my family. They have done so much for me that I will never be able to thank

them enough in this lifetime."

Shafee was instrumental in setting up a fund to pay for Ruzana's legal fees which had surpassed the RM650,000 mark.

Ruzana, accompanied by Shafee and Palany, arrived at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Sepang at 9.10pm last night, and was overwhelmed by emotion as she was greeted by her brother, Mohd Zulkifli.

"I feel like I have been reborn. I learnt my lesson not to trust people so easily the hard way."

On whether she would seek action against Haj, Ruzana said: "He is already in police custody and if the police need my help in any way, I am willing to co-operate."

Mohd Zulkifli said the family's constant prayers gave them hope that Ruzana would be freed.

Shafee said the public, from companies to individuals, donated generously to the legal fund set up for Ruzana.

He said Ruzana's freedom was the result of teamwork and dedication of the legal team defending her.

Besides him and Palany, others in the team were lead counsel John Dailley and barrister Neil Meyell from Sydney.