

The Electric New Paper :

'Million-dollar gun deal claim baseless and a sham'

Nepali critics slam reason given by former crown prince for massacre of royals by killer prince

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Kathmandu's labyrinthine streets were abuzz with talk after The New Paper's interviews with former crown prince Paras Bikram Shah, 37, were carried by many international media, including the BBC, the Times of India and The Telegraph.

The articles have been translated and reproduced by many Nepali media.

In his interview, published over three days earlier this week, Prince Paras pinned the blame squarely on his cousin, then-crown prince Dipendra, for the 2001 palace massacre, which saw 10 members of the royal family slain.

A former high-ranking palace official, however, has come out to contradict this version of events.

Mr Bibek Shah, the military secretary to King Birendra at the time of the massacre, told the BBC Nepali Service that Prince Paras' allegations are 'baseless and a sham'.

An arms deal was on the table, he said, but 'the way he (Prince Paras) presented it in the interview is not true at all'.

According to Prince Paras, Dipendra was interested in buying the German-made Heckler & Koch G36 rifles for the Nepali army.

But he was deeply upset when his father, King Birendra, opposed the idea.

Mr Shah, however, said the Heckler & Koch G36 was one of five or six types of weapons shortlisted for the army.

'But the number and the price that was quoted (in the interview) are not correct,' he told the BBC.

Deal worth millions

The deal, according to Prince Paras, would have been for about 50,000 rifles which, at US\$300 (\$450) apiece, would work out to be worth US\$15 million.

Mr Shah said: 'The agreement that time was to buy 5,000 pieces (of Heckler & Koch G36) and assemble it in Nepal.'

The deal fell through, but not because of a disagreement between father and son, he said.

The reason was that the potential German supplier failed to get a licence from its government for the sale due to a then-embargo on weapon sales to Nepal.

Nepal was in the midst of a Maoist insurgency, and the international community feared that arms sold to the Nepali army would fall into the hands of insurgents.

'I don't know how that matter came to his (Prince Paras') head,' said Mr Shah. 'But it was not a matter of disagreement between the father and son.'

In an article in The Himalayan Times, a retired lieutenant-general separately confirmed there was an arms deal on the table.

'The Nepali Army was running short of weapons as it had increased the number of army personnel,' he said. 'We wanted personal arms to be given to each soldier.'

But he also said the deal fell through because of the embargo.

'So how the prince would have received commission for weapons that could not be bought... only God knows,' said the retired general.

Later, the weapons did somehow make their way into Nepal, according to Jane's Infantry Weapons 2003-4 report, despite the German government's denial of any transaction taking place.

Were royals corrupt?

The BBC's correspondent in Kathmandu, Mr Charles Haviland, said that if Prince Paras' allegations of the father-son dispute over the arms deal were true, it would confirm previously heard accounts of the royals' corruption.

Prof S D Muni, a visiting senior research fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore, said that mentioning the arms deal may be a way for Prince Paras to prove his innocence.

The first inquiry, conducted immediately after the massacre, was carried out by a two-man committee and completed in just one week. It pinned the blame on Prince Dipendra.

Some disputed the findings and remain convinced that Prince Paras and his father, the former King Gyanendra, were behind the killings.

In February, Nepal's new Maoist-led government announced it would form a commission to re-investigate the massacre, almost eight years after it happened.

'With his revelation, Mr Paras has succeeded in confusing people. But the question is whether he will succeed in influencing the new inquiry,' said Prof Muni.

If true, Prince Paras' version of events might end up working against him.

Nepal's Maoist leader Barsha Man Pun told The Himalayan Times that there was 'something sinister' about his allegations, and called for an international investigation into the massacre, in addition to Nepal's own inquiry.

In Singapore, a Nepali professional has characterised Prince Paras' allegations as a publicity stunt.

'He just wants to create a buzz before he goes back to contest in future elections,' said Mr Shah, a professional in his 30s.

He declined to give his full name as he fears for the safety of his relatives, who he alleged were jailed in the 1980s for pro-democracy protests.

As to Prince Paras' declaration that he intends to return to Nepal one day to contest the elections, Mr Shah is neither impressed nor indignant, just ambivalent.

'He is no longer a prince, just an ordinary citizen, and he has the right to do whatever he wants, like any of us,' he said.

'But whether people will vote for him is a different matter altogether.'

The New Paper ran a series of interviews with Prince Paras last week.

The former crown prince had then given three main reasons for the massacre: The royal family's disapproval of Prince Dipendra's choice of bride, his dissatisfaction with his father's decision to relinquish the absolute monarchy, and - most intriguing of all - a botched multi-million dollar arms purchase that opened a rift between father and son.

The interviews were conducted by Associate Editor S Murali and veteran journalist Clement Mesenas, who has worked for newspapers around the world for more than 40 years.

Mr Mesenas, who is currently consulting at a Singapore public relations firm, co-wrote the articles in a private capacity. The interviews were not connected to his PR work.