

'Nepal palace massacre linked to princess' chopper crash death'

Nepal's Maoist Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal Prachanda Friday dropped a new bomb shell, alleging that there was a link between the bloodbath in the royal palace in 2001 that wiped out the king, queen and the entire royal family, and a chopper crash five months later in which the slain queen's youngest sister was killed.

'There is a link between the palace massacre and the Rara incident,' Prachanda told Nepali television station Avenues, referring to the Rara lake in remote Mugu district where Princess Prekshya of Nepal died in a chopper crash along with three more travelling companions.

The allegation revives public doubts about the Rara crash in November 2001, almost five and a half months after Nepal was stunned by the assassination of King Birendra in the tightly guarded Narayanhity royal palace along with his queen Aishwarya, their two children, youngest brother Dhirendra, and four other relatives.

Though a high-level enquiry commission headed by the then parliamentary Speaker Taranath Ranabhat indicated that the carnage was caused by a disgruntled Crown Prince Dipendra, who at the end shot himself in the head in a drugs and drinks-fuelled rage, the majority of Nepalis scoffed at the report, believing it was part of a deep-rooted conspiracy.

The conspiracy theory got a boost when Dhirendra's estranged wife Prekshya, who was also the youngest sister of the dead queen, met with a fatal accident Nov 12, 2001.

The 49-year-old Prekshya was returning to Kathmandu with Ishwor Basnet, an acquaintance, Dan Bahadur Shahi, a palace aide, Lt. Col. Rishi Khatri, her physician, and Sharada Singh Suwal, her personal attendant, when the private helicopter they were travelling in crashed into the lake soon after take-off.

While the princess was killed, the bodies of Basnet, Shahi and the pilot, Rabin Kadaria, could not be found.

The remaining two were flown to Kathmandu for treatment and survived.

Dhirendra, known for his rakish ways, had divorced his wife for another woman, for which the king punished him by stripping him of his prince title.

However, Dhirendra was still given a key role by the king in establishing contacts with the Maoist guerrillas, who had begun an underground war in a bid to end the monarchy and turn Nepal into a republic.

The deaths of Birendra, Dhirendra and Prekshya, who was close to the queen, were regarded by many as a systematic and ruthless attempt to remove all witnesses to secret political deals.

Now the conspiracy theories have been resurrected with Prachanda announcing that his government would begin a fresh investigation into the palace massacre and bring the actual perpetrators to justice.

The Maoist chief, however, did not say immediately if a new investigation would also be ordered into the Rara crash.

But he added that efforts were on to form a new enquiry committee that would meet international standards.

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