

NEW ZEALAND SAS RAID IN AFGHANISTAN UNDER FIRE

WELLINGTON: Pressure mounted on the New Zealand government yesterday to call an inquiry into a botched special forces raid in Afghanistan that reportedly left six civilians dead, including a three-year-old child. A book published this week alleges the SAS staged the 2010 raid as a "revenge attack" after a New Zealand soldier was killed, but faulty intelligence meant they targeted villagers rather than insurgents.

"Hit and Run", written by investigative journalists Nicky Hager and Jon Stephenson, also claims the Wellington government and military covered up the failure, insisting no civilians died when they knew otherwise. One of the centre-right National government's coalition partners, United Future, called for an investigation yesterday after several sources emerged to challenge the official version of events.

"New Zealanders are rightly proud of the reputation of our SAS and armed forces generally, and do not wish to see that diminished, so they deserve open reassurance that our forces have not behaved inappropriately," United Future leader Peter Dunne said. "The current saga of claim and counter-claim will not provide that, therefore some form of independent inquiry is appropriate."

Amnesty International has also called for a probe while a team of New Zealand human rights lawyers announced Friday they were representing affected Afghan villagers and wanted an independent investigation. New Zealand sent a reconstruction team and a small special forces contingent to join the NATO-led operation in Afghanistan in 2003.

In early August 2010, Lieutenant Tim O'Donnell became the first of New Zealand's 10 military deaths in Afghanistan when his patrol was hit by a roadside bomb. The SAS raid in the northern province of Baghlan, planned by the New Zealanders and carried out with US helicopter support, took place about two weeks later on August 22. In the following days Mohammad Ismail, a district chief for Tala Wa Barfak, where the incident occurred, told AFP that eight people died in the raid, all civilians. The New Zealand military initially kept silent about its involvement, then when it emerged said nine insurgents were killed and no civilians harmed. But then-defence minister Wayne Mapp conceded for the first time this week that he knew as early as 2014 that civilians died.

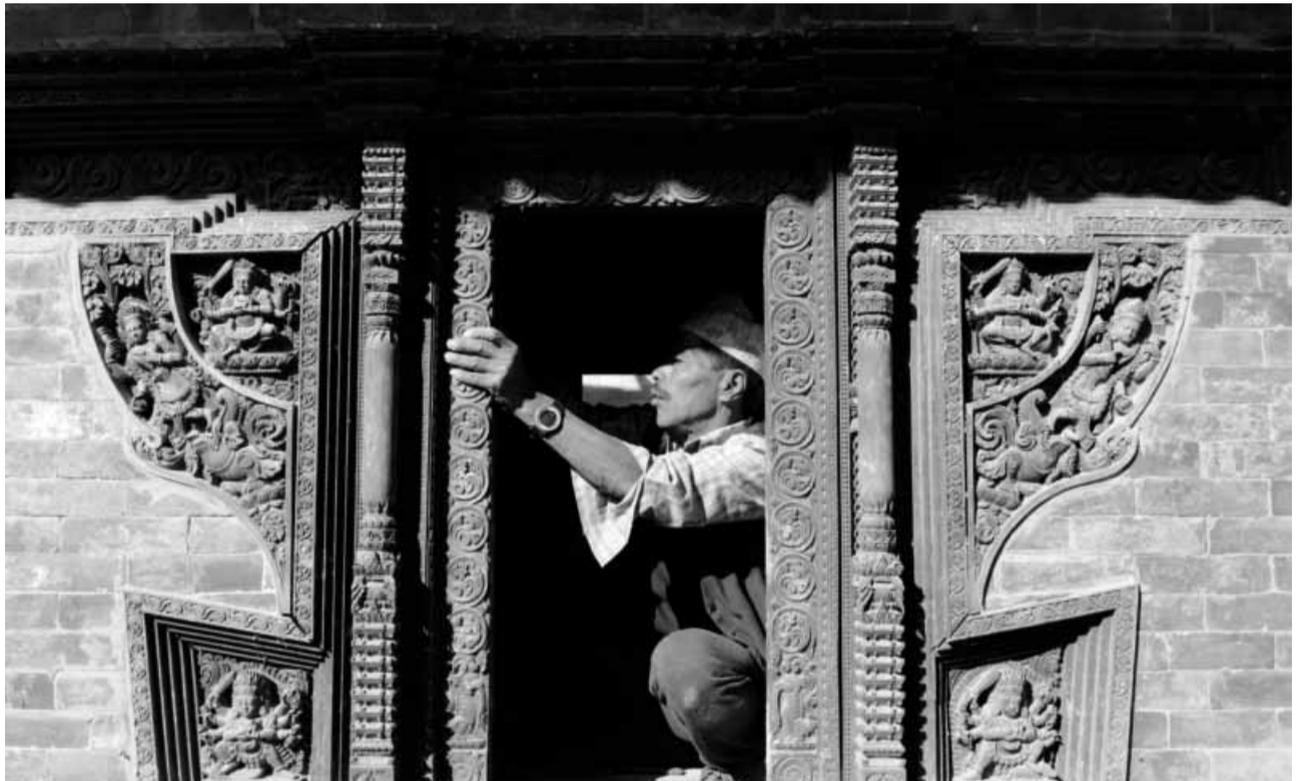
"I'm sure everyone is remorseful about that," he told Newshub. "At the time of the attack they (New Zealand forces) thought they were being attacked by insurgents." The book, citing interviews with villagers and unnamed military sources, says six civilians died, including a three-year-old girl named Fatima. It also alleges soldiers failed to provide medical treatment to wounded civilians and further punished villagers by returning 10 days after the raid to blow up their rebuilding efforts. Hager, co-author of the book, has suggested that such conduct, if true, could constitute a war crime.

Russia denies supplying Taliban

In other related news yesterday, Russia denied allegations by the commander of NATO that Moscow may be assisting the Taliban as the insurgents fight US and NATO forces in Afghanistan. "These claims are absolutely false," Zamir Kabulov, head of the Russian foreign ministry's department responsible for Afghanistan and the Kremlin's special envoy in the country, told RIA Novosti state news agency. "These fabrications are designed, as we have repeatedly underlined, to justify the failure of the US military and politicians in the Afghan campaign. There is no other explanation."

NATO's Supreme Allied Commander, US General Curtis Scaparrotti, who also heads the US military's European Command, told lawmakers in Washington on Thursday that he had witnessed Russia's influence grow in many regions, including in Afghanistan. In a statement to the Senate Armed Services Committee, Scaparrotti said Moscow was "perhaps" supplying the Taliban.

In February General John Nicholson, the US commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan, testified that Russia is encouraging the Taliban and providing them with diplomatic cover in a bid to undermine US influence and defeat NATO. Kabulov in 2015 said that Russia was exchanging information with the Taliban and saw shared interest with them when it comes to fighting the Islamic State jihadist group. Russia considers the Taliban a terrorist group and it is banned in the country, along with the Islamic State group. Taliban fighters on Thursday captured Afghanistan's strategic district of Sangin, where US and British forces suffered heavy casualties until it was handed over to Afghan personnel.—AFP



KATHMANDU: In this picture taken on February 8, 2017, a worker renovates a heritage site at Durbar Square. — AFP

LOWEST BIDDERS THREATENING NEPAL'S QUAKE-HIT HERITAGE

GOVERNMENT DISMISSING COMMUNITY, SACRED RITUALS

KATHMANDU: Caretaker Deepak Shrestha padlocked shut the quake-ravaged remains of the Trailokya Mohan Narayan temple in Nepal's capital Kathmandu to keep out the contractors who are meant to be rebuilding it. The 17th century monument's three-tiered pagoda completely collapsed in a 7.8 magnitude earthquake that hit the Himalayan nation in April 2015, leaving the main statue standing exposed on a high plinth.

Shrestha, whose family has looked after the Hindu temple for generations, is now on a mission to protect it from a government system that grants contracts to rebuild the quake-damaged heritage sites to the lowest bidder. "We had our doubts about the contractors but it was confirmed when they started digging the foundations haphazardly, disregarding the community's involvement and our sacred rituals," Shrestha, 56, told AFP. "We don't believe the cheapest contractors will rebuild our temple sincerely. We demand that the government dismiss such a system." The temple was among more than 700 heritage sites damaged in the disaster which killed nearly 9,000 people and destroyed half a million homes. Nepal's laws state that construction contracts valued at more than 500,000 rupees (\$4,670) must be granted through a tender process to the lowest bidder — and the same rules govern the restoration of ancient temples and buildings.

The system has raised alarm over the quality and techniques being used to rebuild historical sites with experts saying the Kathmandu valley's status as a UNESCO World Heritage site could be under threat. "The lowest bidder is not necessarily the best," Christian Manhart, head of UNESCO in Nepal, told AFP. "There are strong chances that it can be in the world heritage in danger (list)," he added. When the UNESCO World Heritage committee met in July last year, it narrowly

avoided putting the Kathmandu Valley on its "List of World Heritage in Danger", but warned it could be added in 2017 if progress is not made.

'Attack on our heritage'

The government estimates that rebuilding the centuries-old temples and monuments damaged by the quake will cost over \$300 million. Several countries who have pledged support to help Nepal rebuild its cultural heritage have also expressed concerns about the tender process and the slow pace of work.

Nearly two years since the earthquake struck, only ten monuments have so far been rebuilt—some totally bypassing the government's rules. In November last year, the Boudhanath stupa—the country's largest and one of the holiest sites of pilgrimage in Tibetan Buddhism—reopened having been restored with donations from international Buddhist groups.

The restoration was largely community-led and cost \$2.1 million, including over 30 kilograms of gold. Bhesha Narayan Dahal, chief of Nepal's archaeology department, said he is aware of concerns regarding the construction contract sys-

tem and is hopeful the government will respond. "The demands of local communities are justified... but we are helpless, we cannot work beyond the limits of the government's laws, acts and rules," Dahal said.

In deeply religious Nepal, where temples and heritage sites are an integral part of people's lives, other communities are now demanding that the government process be scrapped and they be allowed to take lead in rebuilding. However, dozens of contracts to rebuild cultural monuments have already been granted and more are in the process. Experts also worry that contractors who lack experience of working on heritage projects won't have the contacts to hire traditional wood carvers, stone sculptors and metal workers. Birendra Bhakta Shrestha, who is leading a campaign to rebuild Kathmandu's Kasthamandap temple with community involvement, said locals will continue to battle against the tender process. "Our ancestors have made it and it is our moral right to rebuild it," Shrestha said. "Lowest bidders cannot maintain quality... Residents of Kathmandu can tolerate anything, but cannot tolerate an attack on our heritage." — AFP

PAK POLICE PREVENT CLERICS' RALLY AGAINST BLASPHEMY

ISLAMABAD: Pakistani police have blocked a rally by clerics in Islamabad seeking to press their calls for the death of social media activists accused of insulting Islam. Security forces sealed off and surrounded the Red Mosque and the home of the leader, Maulana Abdul Aziz, preventing his followers from staging the gathering yesterday. Meanwhile, the Center for Inquiry, a US-based advocacy group, has appealed to Facebook not to consider demands by

Pakistan to help identify Pakistanis suspected of blasphemy so that authorities can prosecute them or pursue their extradition. Pakistan has harsh blasphemy laws under which insulting Islam is an offence that carries the death penalty. Pakistan's media have been increasingly attacked by religious hard-liners. The government has asked Facebook and Twitter to censor religiously offensive material emanating from Pakistan.— AP