

IAF compromised PM's safety: CAG

'Without Seeking Govt Nod, Air Force Allowed Pvt Firm To Erect Antenna Near 7, Race Course Road'

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Manmohan Singh

While expressing anger at the PM's security breach, the CAG blasted the IAF for illegally depositing all payments made by the telecom firm in a non-public account, rather than the govt treasury. In a clear case of 'quid pro quo', it says, the firm provided free mobiles to 22 officers as 'a goodwill gesture'

New Delhi: The IAF, tasked with guarding the airspace of the country against threats from enemy nations or terrorists, may have actually compromised the security of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh himself.

Or so believes the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG), which has called for a government probe into how exactly IAF authorities allowed a private telecom company to erect a high-powered booster antenna at the air force station, Race Course, in New Delhi, just a stone's throw away from the PM's house at 7, Race Course Road. "The air force station did not seek any clearance from the government, which is essential as the antenna installed falls in a sensitive security zone," the CAG said, in

its latest report tabled in Parliament.

"By allowing Reliance Infocomm Ltd to erect the antenna in a high security zone, the air officer commanding may have not only compromised but also endangered security... the case needs a probe to fix responsibility for violation of norms," it added. While expressing anger at the security breach, the CAG blasted

the IAF for "violating all canons of financial propriety" by entering into a licence agreement with Reliance Infocomm in January '05 for allowing the installation of the "pole mounted repeater antenna" on "a defence asset".

For one, all the payments made by the telecom firm were being "unauthorisedly" deposited in a "non-public account", the President

Service Institute (PSI) of the Air Force station, rather than the government treasury. These include a monthly lease rebate of Rs 16,000 and monthly cleaning charges of Rs 200, apart from a non-refundable security deposit of Rs 75,000 and a refundable deposit of a similar amount.

"The PSI is a non-public fund entity and has no authority to lease any public asset to a private party," the CAG said, adding while Reliance Infocomm was exploiting government resources, all payments made by it were being deposited in the "non-public account". That's not all. In a clear case of "quid pro quo", the company has provided free cellphones to 22 officers as "a goodwill gesture". First, the firm provided cellphones to 20 officers, with a maximum amount of Rs 15,000 in May 2004. And then, "the

number of free mobile connections was increased to 22 in July 2005", the CAG said. When asked, the IAF indicated the usage charges for the mobiles were being offset against the monthly lease rebate of Rs 16,000. "The propriety of the same is also not free from doubt," the CAG said.

MiG-27 upgrade questioned

The IAF's efforts to upgrade its ground attack MiG-27s have been questioned by the CAG, saying the aircraft would have only a "limited viability". "The upgrade project will have limited viability," it said in its report as it felt inherent problems being faced by the jets and engines have not been resolved. It said widespread time overruns would dilute benefits as the "upgraded aircraft would have a very short residual life".