

Kathmandu: A billion-dollar gambling industry built up in Nepal by a chartered accountant from New Delhi, which encompassed seven casinos and employed nearly 7,000 people, has been left tottering with lawmakers Tuesday ordering the government to scrap their license unless they cleared their dues within 30 days.

The Public Accounts Committee of Nepal's

interim parliament Tuesday issued the directive to Kishore Thapa, secretary at the tourism and civil aviation ministry, after grilling him last week over the casinos' growing failure to pay the royalty it owes the state, now estimated to be about NRS 193 million.

Rakesh Wadhwa, a Xaverian from Kolkata and former runner of casinos in Sri Lanka, was not available for comments on the unravelling of his kingdom. He has been incommunicado since last month, after the casinos came under fire, and skipped even the launch of his own novel, "The Dealmaker" published by Rupa.

Currently, he is believed to have fled Nepal.

The 53-year-old heads Nepal Recreation Center (NRC), the organisation that had a monopoly on the casino industry in the 1990s, when Nepal was still a kingdom and the royal family had a stake in the industry.

At that time however NRC was ruled by an American, Richard Tuttle, who took Wadhwa, then a chartered accountant working with a five-star hotel in Kathmandu, under his wing.

By 2007, the relationship between the two had changed dramatically with Wadhwa routing his mentor and establishing his control over NRC and the casino kingdom.

However, the controversial victory was short-lived with another powerful player entering the stage.

It was Raj Bahadur Singh, the son-in-law of deposed king Gyanendra, who threw out NRC from one of the best-known casinos - the Casino Royale from which Charles Sobhraj was arrested in 2003 - for non-payment of rent to the Yak and Yeti hotel whose premises it had leased. Singh

then began running the casino himself.

Soon another hotel, the Shangri-la, sued NRC for non-payment of rent and won the long legal battle. Now the hotel says it will throw out NRC from the Casino Shangri-la operating from its premises and will run the gaming centre itself.

Wadhwa is left with only four casinos: Casino Nepal, the oldest casino in the country and where Dev Anand shot some of the scenes of "Hare Krishna Hare Ram", Casino Anna, Casino Tara and Casino Everest.

Casino Tara too remains under a cloud with reports about the Hyatt Regency hotel, whose grounds the casino operates from, also seeking to evict it.

Besides the rent, the casinos are also way behind in paying the royalty they owe the government.

Last week, Finance Minister Surendra Pandey locked horns with Tourism and Civil Aviation Minister Sharad Singh Bhandari, demanding that the casinos be shut down since they were not paying the royalty due to the government.

The fight is regarded as a political duel between two major parties - the ruling communists and the opposition Maoists.

The Maoist trade union controls the casinos and the ruling party's demand for jobs for its men went unheeded.

This triggered a series of raids on the casinos ordered by Home Minister Bhim Rawal, who belongs to the communist party.

Nepal's laws forbid Nepalis from gambling in the casinos but with the number of Indian tourists falling, Nepalis have been flocking to the casinos.

Ironically, the Maoists, who during their 10-year People's War banned card-playing and other forms of gambling, have now been demanding that the ban be lifted.

It is also ironical that Wadhwa has stakes in four casinos in Goa, whose development as a gaming destination is weaning away Indian gamblers from Nepal.

In the 1990s, Wadhwa's casino kingdom in Sri Lanka fell after the government took over in the name of nationalisation.

Now it remains to be seen if fate has dealt him the same card in Nepal or whether he can bounce back.

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