Talwar firms got ₹230 cr at AI expense: ED

PRITAM PAL SINGH & DEEPTIMAN TIWARY
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THE ENFORCEMENT DIRECTORATE on Thursday told a special court that companies associated with corporate aviation lobbyist Deepak Talwar were paid in excess of ₹230 crore in connection with the Air India seat-sharing case.

Talwar was deported by Dubai authorities to India early on Wednesday along with Dubai-based businessman Rajeev Saxena, an accused in the AgustaWestland VVIP chopper deal case.

Rajeev Saxena, an accused in the AgustaWestland chopper deal case, in New Delhi on Thursday REUTERS

Special judge Santosh Snehi Mann granted the ED seven days custody of Talwar after the agency requested 14 days of custody claiming that their probe has revealed that Talwar acted as a middle man in the irregular seat-sharing on Air India's profitable routes with three international airlines.

ED's counsel DP Singh contended that officials of the ministry of civil aviation, NACIL, Air India, misused their official positions as public servants and received illegal gratification, in conspiracy with other public servants, private domestic and foreign airlines, making the national carrier, give up profit-making routes and profit-making timings in favour of national and international domestic and foreign private airlines.

"This resulted in huge loss of market share to the national carrier and also led to pecuniary benefits to private domestic airlines," the ED counsel said, adding that custodial interrogation is imperative to ascertain his role in the association with bilateral air services talks and the inroads made by him to influence the decisions.

Talwar's counsel Tanveer Ahmed Mir opposed the ED's contention saying the investigation is based on documents and the agency has the same in their custody, so no purpose would serve to take him into custody.

"While probing a case of money laundering against corporate consultant Deepak Talwar, we stumbled upon some money trail that is linked to the entire matter of Air India. We have traced a payment linked to the Air India case to entities linked to Deepak Talwar. Though he is not an office bearer in these companies, we have intelligence that he is the ultimate beneficiary. We need to question him further on these companies," a senior ED official said.

In November 2017, the CBI had registered a case of cheating, forgery and criminal conspiracy against Talwar for allegedly diverting foreign funds received by his NGO for personal use. It alleged Talwar's NGO Advantage India received funds to the tune of ₹90.72 crore from Airbus and MBDA, Europe's leading missile manufacturing company.

The funds had been received as part of corporate social responsibility (CSR) of the two donors and were meant for activities in the field of education.

In September 2016, *The Indian Express* reported that funds donated by the two foreign firms to Advantage India had come under the scanner of the income tax department.