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Shooting groups in legal dispute over armoury

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Parent body, rifle group disagree on who will operate facility after upgrading to meet security rules

The armoury from which the police seized more than 70 weapons last week has come under the spotlight in an ongoing legal tussle between the parent body overseeing shooting in Singapore and the Singapore Rifle Association (SRA), which runs the armoury.

The Singapore Shooting Association (SSA), which wants to upgrade the space at the National Shooting Centre in Old Choa Chu Kang Road, in line with new security requirements, had asked the SRA to hand over the space.

But the SRA refused to meet the deadline of Oct 3 last year, countering that the one-month notice to clear out is invalid and too short.

The SRA is also counterclaiming for breach of agreement, arguing that there was an understanding that it would continue to operate the armoury and office after it signed a fresh pact - known as the proprietary range agreement - in 2014.

The SRA, in defence papers filed by its lawyer Wendell Wong, argued that when the 2014 agreement allowed it to maintain a shooting range for 10 years, there was also an implied agreement that it was entitled to operate, manage and occupy the SRA armoury and office for a similar 10-year period.

This was the understanding, given that the range and the premises were inseparable functions in the context of the sport.

The SRA said it was ready to do its part to pay for upgrading works to the SRA armoury to meet new police requirements.

The upgrading works include replacing the existing gates with a vault door and grille gate, making sure that firearms and ammunition are stored in separate storage cabinets to meet required specifications, and installing closed-circuit television cameras to monitor activities within the armoury.

The SRA claimed the deal was to formalise its right to manage and operate the armoury and office when the upgrading works were done.

But the SSA disputes this, countering that it was instead agreed that it would do the upgrading works and be reimbursed by the SRA, and it would then lease the armoury to the SRA for ammunition storage only.

In court papers filed by its lawyer Anthony Lee, the SSA said the police had advised it of new security requirements in November 2014, which included those pertaining to the SRA armoury, and the SRA was aware of them.

The SSA council's adviser, Brigadier-General (Ret) Lim Kim Lye, then suggested a single-armoury concept, including a centralised place to keep all firearms and some ammunition and a basement vault to keep most of the ammunition.

But in May last year, the police met SSA officials and expressed concern that the SRA had not complied with the security requirements, said court papers.

The SSA said at a council meeting four days later that it was agreed that a ground-level armoury run by the Singapore Gun Club (SGC) would be the only firearms store at the National Shooting Centre, while two basement armoury rooms would be used to store SRA and SGC ammunition separately.

The move was to strengthen workflow and security to put into effect the single-armoury concept, and the meeting agreed to it. But one month later, the SRA said it had not agreed to the armouries being shared and had to ask its members.

The SSA said it was in this context that it made clear to the SRA on July 21 last year that it owned the National Shooting Centre facilities and that after upgrading was done, the SRA armoury would be leased to the SRA only for ammunition

storage.

Deadlocked, the SSA gave the SRA a month's notice last September to quit the armoury. It pointed out that the SRA's chairman had replied a week later to ask for six months' notice, which implied that the SRA understood that the SSA had the right to revoke the lease.

A pre-trial conference is due to be held in the High Court this month.

Shooting: Laxness behind lapses - Shooting body chief

A tighter rein will be kept on armoury management at the National Shooting Centre (NSC) with licensing watched closely in particular, following an unprecedented seizure of firearms from the facility last week.

Singapore Shooting Association (SSA) president Michael Vaz told The Straits Times yesterday that, having run into resistance while trying to introduce a security revamp over the last year, the latest episode now means additional backing from Sport Singapore (SportSG) and other stakeholders to crack the whip.

"This was a complete lapse and breach of every rule in running an armoury. It's a major issue," he said.

While one or two licensing irregularities showing up on routine audits is fairly common, this latest check of the Old Choa Chu Kang Road facility that resulted in the police seizing a total of 77 firearms is out of the ordinary.

Among the firearms seized: One with an expired licence came under the Safra Shooting Club, one belonged to a Singapore Gun Club (SGC) member who had not paid the licence fee, while the rest came under the Singapore Rifle Association (SRA). All are member clubs of the SSA.

It is believed these irregularities are a result of some of the arms not having the proper licences. This could be due to members quitting the club, leaving the country or, in some cases, having passed away.

A statement from the Singapore Police Force said: "On Feb 2, the Police Licensing & Regulatory Department conducted an arms audit at the armouries of the SGC and the SRA. Due to serious licensing irregularities, the police took possession of a

number of arms. Police investigations are ongoing."

SportSG, the national sports governing body, has closed the ranges at the NSC while the issue is being resolved. It will give the green light to reopen the facility after the police sign off on it.

The Straits Times understands that such lapses, if left unaddressed, could lead to the police withdrawing the licence to operate the armoury.

In response to queries from ST, an SRA official said the club will cooperate fully with investigations.

Said Mr Conrad Chung, the SRA's first assistant honorary secretary: "We are disappointed and regret this has happened, and are unaware of such an event ever occurring in our history.

"We will work with the authorities in relation to systems and procedures in order to achieve the highest level of safety and security."

While a scheduled annual shoot involving Singapore and Japan shooters this weekend at the NSC has been cancelled, provisions have been made for the national shooters to continue training at the facility so that their training will not be affected.

The SGC has informed its members of the temporary closure of the range while reminding them to renew their firearms licences on time.

Mr Vaz, who is also the SGC's president, said lax attitudes in terms of managing an armoury have led to these lapses.

He said: "This is the first time I've heard (of so many lapses).

"The audit was far more intensive than ever before. We decided to close the NSC to facilitate the investigations, help clean things up faster."

Amy Chen

Additional reporting by Jonathan Wong

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