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HEADLINE: Prince Andrew under pressure as Palace disputes teen sex scandal claims

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LEIGH SALES, PRESENTER: It's been a few years since Britain's Royal Family has been embroiled in a serious scandal, but once again, Prince Andrew has stepped forward.

He's accused of having sex with an underage girl in sensational details aired in an American court case.

The young woman says she was forced to entertain the Duke at the behest of his friend, billionaire and convicted paedophile Jeffrey Epstein.

Prince Andrew's ex-wife, Sarah Ferguson, has leapt to his defence and Buckingham Palace is also strenuously denying the allegations.

But, as Europe correspondent Philip Williams reports, the claims have blown apart the always uneasy calm between the Palace and the British press.

PHILIP WILLIAMS, REPORTER: As fifth in line to the throne, whatever Prince Andrew does or says will never go unnoticed.

So when media reports about a lawsuit in the US emerged linking his name with underage sex, the long period of relative Royal calm was abruptly shattered.

This woman, Virginia Roberts, is believed to be the person named in court papers as "Jane Doe 3". In a newspaper interview she claims she was used for underage sex by American billionaire Jeffrey Epstein and says she was lent out to his rich and powerful friends, including Prince Andrew. It's claimed she had sex with him three times when she was 17 at Jeffrey Epstein's luxury Caribbean Island home and in New York and London, all denied by Prince Andrew.

VICTORIA MURPHY, UK MIRROR ROYAL CORRESPONDENT: If this doesn't go away quickly, if these allegations continue to be made, if more allegations are added, this could be incredibly damaging, not just for Andrew, but for the monarchy as a whole.

PHILIP WILLIAMS: It all seems a world away from the golden glow of recent Royal events - a wedding that cemented the popularity of Prince William and his bride. Followed of course by the arrival of baby Prince George. And for the Queen, a diamond jubilee, a celebration of 60 years on the throne, reason for her to smile as the nation and beyond said thanks for her never-ending job.

Over the weekend, that run of feel-good luck expired.

Normally with a story like this, Buckingham Palace would be more inclined to stay quiet, not to give any oxygen whatsoever to the sort of claims that have been made. But this time, it's very, very different. Not one, but two statements saying Prince Andrew is completely innocent of all the accusations.

VICTORIA MURPHY: They issued one statement initially in response to the allegations that Prince Andrew had had sex with an underage minor and that was what they were responding to and they were categorically denying that that had been the case. However, in doing that they had left the door open that perhaps he was only denying the fact that she was a minor and questions were being asked about that. So when more of her allegations surfaced, they decided that they needed to release an even stronger denial, categorically denying any sexual contact whatsoever.

PHILIP WILLIAMS: What isn't in dispute is that Prince Andrew and Jeffrey Epstein were good friends over a number of years.

In 2008, Mr Epstein was sentenced to 18 months' jail for soliciting an underage girl for the purposes of prostitution. That, after a controversial plea bargain. He remains a registered sex offender.

Yet in 2011, after his release, Prince Andrew was seen with his old friend in New York Central Park. That cost Prince Andrew an unpaid job he was said to have loved as the UK's Trade and Industry special representative, opening doors for British business overseas.

CHRIS BRYANT, LABOUR MP (March, 2011): But I'm afraid he's now just become a national embarrassment. And my worry is that sometimes when he goes on these trips, I'm not sure whether he's helping us out or he's just helping himself.

PHILIP WILLIAMS: For him, that door closed as a direct result of his association with Jeffrey Epstein.

VICTORIA MURPHY: People who know Prince Andrew have said that he is very loyal to his friends and that that is one of his strong points. However, I think that those closest to him now accept that that particular friendship and the loyalty to Jeffrey Epstein that continued until after he was convicted of paedophilia, I think people are now saying, you know, he accepts that that was a mistake. However, what is being said is that Andrew is only guilty of choosing his friends badly. He's not guilty of anything else.

PHILIP WILLIAMS: Prince Andrew isn't the only one named in the court documents, and while he isn't publicly defending himself, another of those accused certainly is.

Harvard Law Professor **Alan Dershowitz** has been doing the media rounds of the US and beyond. He denies even knowing his accuser, let alone having sex with her.

ALAN DERSHOWITZ, HARVARD LAW SCHOOL: My goal is to bring charges against the client and require her to speak in court. She - if she believes she has been hurt by me and by Prince Andrew, she should be suing us for damages. I welcome that lawsuit. I welcome any opportunity which would put her under oath and require her to state under oath these false allegations.

PHILIP WILLIAMS: Under the plea bargain struck with prosecutors by Jeffrey Epstein, it appears that other potential allegations may not end up tested in court and that could apply to possible co-conspirators, an arrangement alleged victims were not involved with.

Through Palace statements, the Duke of York has unequivocally denied any wrongdoing. He's not charged with anything, nor has he been questioned by police.

But the Queen's second son is in a spotlight he cannot wish away. His annus horribilis may have just begun.

LEIGH SALES: Philip Williams reporting from London.

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