

Air chief says sorry for giving wrong info

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the committee chairman.

In reply, Committee Chairman Mahbubur Rahman, who is also a former army chief, said the air force chief took permission to clarify the air force headquarters' position about the purchase. Sayeed Eskandar left the meeting after half an hour. It is learnt that he is usually involved in all defence purchases.

Awami League lawmaker Shawkat Ali alleged that a third party was involved with the purchase and took a commission as no international tender had been floated for the purchase. He demanded formation of a sub-committee to find out the third party, but the committee chairman did not give any clear decision in this regard.

The air force chief at the meeting claimed that there was no corruption in the process of purchasing the fighter planes, a claim that was challenged outright by

Shawkat Ali.

"How could you be sure that there was no third party involved with the purchase. The third party could have taken commission from the Chinese government," the AL lawmaker said.

At the beginning of the meeting the air force chief took the floor and gave a clarification about the confusion created regarding the procurement cost of the 16 fighters.

The air force headquarters in a report placed to the parliamentary standing committee on defence ministry on April 16 said the total price of the fighters was \$117.9 million.

Water Resources Minister Hafiz Uddin Ahmed, who is also in charge of the defence ministry in parliamentary affairs, on February 22 informed Jatiya Sangsad that the government in the fiscal year 2004-05 had signed an agreement with China to procure 16 fighter planes at a cost of \$93.6 million.

The Daily Star in a report published on April 21 showed that at least \$9 million of the expenditure remains unaccounted for in the recent procurement.

Later the air force headquarters in a clarification said it gave erroneous information to the parliamentary body about the purchase.

Referring to the erroneous information, the air force chief at the meeting apologised to the parliamentary body for providing it with wrong information. Both the committee chairman and AL lawmaker confirmed that the air force chief regretted the information gap.

As soon as the air force chief completed his clarification, AL lawmaker Shawkat Ali raised a volley of questions. "Why the fighter planes were purchased based only on an international budgetary tender?" he asked. "The price of the fighter planes could have been reduced much if an international tender was

floated for the purchase. But it was not done as a third party was involved," he alleged.

In a quick response, a committee member also a minister without portfolio Altaf Hossain Chowdhury said there was no need for floating an international tender as the deal was signed between the governments of Bangladesh and China.

Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment Minister Quamrul Islam, who is also a committee member, inquired whether any European company made any offer.

The director general of defence purchase was not present at the meeting.

About the allegations and the demand to form a sub-committee raised by the opposition lawmaker, the committee chairman said he did not give any decision. "We can hold further discussions on the issue if needed," he told

reporters after the meeting held in Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban.

The parliamentary body also discussed modernisation of the Bangladesh Navy. The naval chief informed the committee that the government has declared formation of a three-dimensional navy.

"For this, a submarine and two maritime aircraft will be purchased in future," committee member Shawkat Ali told reporters.

Quoting the naval chief, the committee chairman said the navy headquarters has already started training its officers to that end.

About the demarcation of maritime boundary, the committee said in fact there has been no sustainable achievement in this regard.

The Armed Forces Division informed the committee that the preparation of a draft defence policy is almost complete.

Ctg mayor backs out of blockade plan

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on privatisation of handling operation at the New Mooring Terminal, said sources close to the mayor.

During the press conference at the CCC Auditorium, the mayor said he was ready to withdraw the entire agitation programme had the government assured him of solving the ongoing crisis through dialogue.

He had earlier announced a strike for May 18 and an indefinite blockade of the country's premier port from May 19.

At the conference he said the programme was an apolitical one to resist the privatisation move which, he said, is a plot to ruin the port by handing it over to the mafia.

A conspiracy has long been there to prove the Chittagong port a losing concern to pave the way for the 'hand-over', he alleged.

The mayor, also the general secretary of Chittagong city Awami League (AL), reiterated his resolve to press ahead with the campaign against the privatisation move.

Chittagong city AL President MA Mannan, Chittagong (north) district AL President Engineer Mosharraf Hossain, Chittagong (south) district AL General Secretary Moslem Uddin Ahmed, Communist Party Bangladesh (CPB) Chittagong unit leader Shah Alam, former president of C&F Agents Association M Salimullah and Gonotonri Party President Saifuddin Khan were also present.

The other speakers at the conference said they were united to make the agitation a success in the interest of the country.

They described the privatisation move as an attempt of some ministers and a particular 'Bhaban' to plunder the national property. Immediately before the press conference, a Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) delegation led by Acting President SMAbu Tayeb met the mayor at his office. They requested him to find an alternative to the agitation programme aimed at paralysing the port.

The BGMEA leaders said the programme if enforced will lead to a halt in handling activities at the port and in that case, the garments sector would be worst affected.

Besides, they said they are afraid the deadlock will tarnish the image of the country, said a meeting source.

In reply, Mohiuddin asked the business leaders to make some sacrifices for the sake of national interest, added the source.

Meanwhile, in response to the agitation programme, Chittagong

port Authority (CPA) has taken all-out measures to keep the port operational.

Besides, security in the port area has been stepped up, said the sources in the CPA.

SHIPPING MINISTER'S LETTER

As of last night, nothing could be known about the content of Akbar's letter as Mohiuddin left his office shortly after its receipt.

During the phone conversation last evening, the shipping minister requested the mayor to withdraw the agitation programme and hold talks.

In reply, Mohiuddin said the agitation programme could be withdrawn only after the privatisation move is cancelled, private secretary to the mayor told The Daily Star.

