

Russia to sell warplanes to Malaysia

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Visiting Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday wrapped up a 900-million-dollar deal to sell warplanes to Malaysia and sets his sights on more sales in the region.

"With the delivery of the Sukhoi, hopefully it will promote Russian aviation technology to Southeast Asia," Putin said at the launch of the Malaysia-Russia Business Council here.

The centrepiece of Putin's first visit to this mainly Muslim nation is the signing of an agreement to supply 18 Sukhoi Su-30MK fighter jets to the Royal Malaysian Air Force.

The combat aircraft forms part of a major arms procurement spree by Malaysia which includes French submarines, British and Russian missile systems and Polish attack tanks.

The squadron of Sukhoi will join Russian-made MiG-29Ns, US-made FA-18Ds and British-made Hawks in Malaysia's combat aircraft fleet, officials said.

Analysis in Moscow had predicted that Putin would use the trip to Malaysia, the first by a Russian

president, to boost his country's position in the Asian arms market.

Under fire for its nuclear cooperation with Iran, Russia is not keen to further rile the United States by increasing its arms sales to the Islamic regime and is instead seeking alternate customers, they said.

The Sukhoi deal is a sign that Russia is turning back to Asia after the relationship that flourished with the US after the September 11 attacks cooled over the US-led war in Iraq, said analyst Viktor Kremenyuk of the USA-Canada Institute in Moscow.

Malaysia is also a strong critic of the US invasion of Iraq, and the issue was raised obliquely at a question and answer session after Putin's address to several hundred businessmen at an hotel in the capital Kuala Lumpur.

In reply to a question on the "unilateral trend" in world affairs, Putin said through an interpreter: "In our view, a multi-polar world will serve as a basis where the rule of law triumphs and the practise of leading international organisations is complied with."

They demanded cancellation of the Gram Sarkar Act, 2003, strong union councils and Gram Adalat and empowerment of woman members in union councils.

Speakers at the rally, chaired by Motiur Rahman Tapan, Sardaha union council (Charghat upazila) chairman, threatened greater movement in the union level if the government did not cancel the GS formation.

They heavily criticised the government for introducing the Gram Sarkar, vowing that people's movement will force it to cancel the GS Act like in the past.

They also feared the formation of the GS will contribute to the deterioration of law and order at villages as the ruling coalition loyalists are being selected for different GS posts.

Ali Majid Abdul Khawaja, chairman of Jhikra union, Bijon Sarkar, chairman of Govindapur union, Mohammad Mohsin and chairman of Shuvodanga union (Bagmara upazila) also spoke.

Workers' Party Politbureau Member Fazle Hossain Badsha and the district's General Secretary Rafiqul Islam Piarul also attended the meeting, extending their support to the movement.

Peacekeepers

Charles Taylor's decision to quit office on August 11. Since Monday, small contingents of regional forces have begun to move into the West African nation beset with months of fighting.

More than 1,000 people have died so far in the civil war between forces loyal to President Charles Taylor and the Liberian United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD).

The measures have angered the pro-government telecom labour union. The union gave the ultimatum.

They threatened to launch widespread agitation programmes in various telecom installations -- declared key point installations (KPI) -- if the demand was not met.

The government recently declared all telecom installations, public and private, as KPIs and banned agitational programmes in all such places.

The BTTSKU had earlier pressured GM Obaidullah to withdraw the disciplinary measures through discussion with the union leaders.

The GM, however, refused to initiate any dialogue on this issue. As a result, the union leaders barred him from entering his office. They have been agitating on the Sher-e-Bangla Nagar Exchange premises since Sunday.

The agitation has been hampering the activities at the largest telecom exchange in the capital.

Obaidullah, after being declared an unwanted person at his own office, yesterday lodged a complaint with the BTTB chairman.

He explained the enormity of pressure from the union against his official steps and accused the union leaders of bringing false allegations against him.

The union leaders have even described his stern measures as politically motivated, the GM said in his letter.

The Bangladesh Civil Service Telecom Samity has said the activities of the unionists directly contradict the code of conduct of trade unions.

The security and service of the state-owned telecom enterprise would be in jeopardy if the authorities did not take immediate measures to counter such union activities, the statement warned.

It demanded exemplary punishment to the unscrupulous employees agitating for a wrong cause.

The Ministry of Post and Telecommunications has advised the BTTB chairman to hold a meeting with the union leaders and the BCS Telecom Samity officials to end the stalemate. The meeting will be held on Thursday, sources said.

Three to do life for killing housewife in Comilla

UNB, Comilla

Three people were awarded life imprisonment by a court here yesterday for killing a housewife in 1999.

The convicts are Firoz, Khokan and Delwar of Bhagatpur village in Daudkandi Upazila.

Sessions Judge Md Ansar Ali also fined the convicts Tk 50,000 each, in default, they are to suffer three more years in jail.

According to the prosecution, the convicts called Parul, daughter of Abdul Majid of the village, out of her father's house on the night of July 13, 1999 and killed her in a pre-planned way.

The following day, the victim's father filed a case with Daudkandi Police Station accusing the three.

After examining documents and witnesses, the judge found them guilty and gave the verdict.

Gram Sarkar

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strated in front of the office of deputy commissioner (DC), demanding cancellation of the GS formation.

They also handed over a memorandum containing eight-point demand to the DC for sending it to the prime minister.

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Troops for Iraq

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Shell's quit spills slick

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first evaluation by the government in August-September 1999. This evaluation was, however, never made public.

But within October, Shell realised it needed more than just economic predictions and enthusiasm to do business in Bangladesh. Signs of corruption and shifting of direction surfaced in October when Shell, the world's biggest oil company, saw that the government offered a little known small Irish company the blocks in which it had unofficially qualified. Shell was also refused more than one block. Again this lone block was the least important one.

As Shell became disappointed with such deviation, the government offered it two blocks. Again, during negotiating the two blocks -- it tried to pass block 10 to Unocal, another preferred company of the government.

An executive of a leading power company of Singapore came to Dhaka to invest in a 2000 MW power plant in 2002. During his four-day stay, he met a certain influential young political leader and a senior minister who are not related to the energy sector. He did not meet the power board, the energy ministry or Petrobangla, but he was given assurance that a deal would be signed soon. Ultimately, nothing happened.

In the last two years, oil companies witnessed gradual ineffectiveness of the designated offices of Petrobangla and the PDB in taking their own decisions. A lot buzzwords like 'unbundling', 'reforms' and 'gas export' were heard. And the present government blamed everything on the previous government but did virtually nothing new itself.

A simple example of how poorly the government handled the energy sector is evident in the fact that Petrobangla always owed Shell over \$100 million for purchase of Sangu gas (equivalent to five months' gas billing) when it could have paid all arrears in due time.

Petrobangla earns as much as Tk 2,000 crore a year even after buying Sangu gas all year round five months behind schedule. Petrobangla is not allowed to keep its earnings to its accounts and it submits all its earnings to the national exchequer. It pays through the finance ministry as the payment is made in dollars. Therefore, the responsibility of gas payment actually falls on the government -- not on an individual institution like Petrobangla. It was the responsibility of the higher authorities to ensure that Shell or other oil companies got their payments in time.

The ministers concerned always

gives the company the chance to hold two blocks for five years without any exploration or development. If Shell thought the local gas market was expanding, only then it would begin operations in these blocks.

But nothing changed after the change of government.

Corruption became even more dominant. In the last two years, there were virtually no new investors in power and gas sectors. And those who came in to tap markets were introduced to top political leaders instead of the Power Development Board or Petrobangla.

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used this fact to justify the premise of gas export and that the country did not have adequate foreign currency to buy PSC gas.

But imagine the country without Sangu gas. Sangu supplies up to 160 million cubic feet of gas per day (mmcf) when the total gas consumption is over 125 mmcf.

If Sangu gas were not there, what would have the government done to meet this basic energy need? Petrobangla top officials say in that case the country would have imported oil and used that to run power plants and divert gas lines to cater to the gas-fired fertiliser plants. And what is the cost of this oil import? The answer is three times the cost of gas. And would any oil exporting country allow Bangladesh to leave arrears of \$100 million for purchase of oil? No. Only an investor inside Bangladesh that predicted a huge market growth could be made hostage to this situation. In this case, Shell was the victim of shortsighted economic management of the government.

When US company Occidental rolled out from Bangladesh, it did not really matter -- because Occidental was responsible for negligence in Magurjhara. And when US company AES started the process of selling off its two power plants to British company Globelco, again it did not really matter. Because AES is globally facing a financial crunch and it had to cut down its size to survive. But the Shell case has a lot of serious implications for Bangladesh.

"The exit of Shell is now a fact, and it cannot be reversed. But if there is any lesson here, the government should learn that," says a Shell official.

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The ministers concerned always

World Bank VP vows development alliance

UNB, Dhaka

World Bank Vice-president for South Asia Praful Patel yesterday pledged to strengthen assistance and partnership for socio-economic development of Bangladesh.

The assurance came when he called on Prime Minister Khaleda Zia at her office in the afternoon.

Patel, visiting Dhaka for the first time since his appointment as vice president in July, said Bangladesh's development in some cases could be a model for other countries.

He said steps have been taken to strengthen the World Bank's Dhaka Office to make more contribution in the development of Bangladesh.

Lauding the measures for economic development, the World Bank executive said the efforts have helped to change Bangladesh's position in the human development index.

He also expressed confidence

Rumi's father wants the noose for daughter's stalkers

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

Father of Umme Habiba Rumi, the second year student of Nazirhat College who committed suicide on Friday, is doubtful about the sincerity of the administration's efforts to arrest the two brothers whose continuous harassment led his daughter to take her own life.

Before hanging herself, Rumi left a suicide note relating her traumatic experience due to sexual harassment by the two brothers Mohammad Azam and Mohammad Nazim.

"Five days after my daughter's death, the two main culprits are still at large. Would I be accused of overreacting if I now question the administration's sincerity about arresting the culprits who harassed my beloved daughter to death? Except for the officer-in-charge of the Fatkchhara Police Station, none of the top officials of the district or police administration deemed it necessary to visit us," Rumi's father Abdul Kalam told reporters at the Chittagong offices of the daily Prothom Alo and The Daily Star yesterday.

The bereaved father recalled the fond memories of his deceased daughter, and narrated how much his "jovial and bright child" cherished the dream of becoming a lawyer to help poor litigants, and how earnestly he hoped to see her dream come true. "But now both my child and her dream are buried forever."

"I demand capital punishment to the culprits," Abdul Kalam said in a choked voice.

Meanwhile, Rumi's elder sister Nahida Akhtiar Sumi lodged another case with the Fatkchhara Police Station under Women and Children Repression Prevention Act Saturday, accusing four including Azam and Nazim. The two others accused are Md. Saifuddin alias Shahabuddin and Abdul Haq alias Fenzu. Police arrested Fenzu from his house at Roshangiri yesterday.

5-yr-old boy