

## US, Pakistan agree to proceed with F-16s package deal

AFP, Washington

Pakistan has agreed to purchase a scaled-down package of American F-16 fighters after foregoing a larger purchase to finance relief efforts in last year's earthquake, officials said Thursday.

Pakistani Foreign Secretary Riaz Khan and US Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns said after a round of talks that they had agreed to proceed with the sale but would not provide the number of aircraft.

Khan said it was "a much scaled-down request" from the package under consideration last year that reportedly included 25 new aircraft at around 25 million dollars apiece.

"In view of the constraints that we have on resources, we have now a far less ambitious package which is a mix of some old, used aircraft and some new," he told a joint news conference.

Burns said he reassured Khan "that we are committed the sale of American F-16 aircraft to Pakistan and we intend to begin our consultations on this issue with Congress shortly."

Washington had blocked the sale of F-16s to Pakistan for 15 years to protest its nuclear weapons programme, but gave the green light in March 2005 to reward the South Asian ally for its help in the "war on terror."

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf said in November he had to postpone the purchase to concentrate on helping victims of the devastating earthquake that killed more than 73,000 people the month before.

Khan said the US-Pakistan defence consultative group would

meet next week in Washington to discuss further cooperation between the countries, but he gave no details.

Pakistan already has more than 30 multi-role F-16s made by US aerospace giant Lockheed Martin Corp. and the deal announced last year for more fighters angered nuclear rival India.

But the United States said it was also prepared to sell New Delhi both F-16s and more sophisticated F-18 fighter-bombers if it wanted them.

Washington also jolted Pakistan when it struck a deal in March to supply long-denied civilian nuclear technology to the Indians as long as they kept it separate from their bombing activities.

Burns again sought to reassure the Pakistanis that the agreement was strictly to help India produce electricity and would not tip the balance of nuclear power on the subcontinent.

"It's going to be positive for the Indians, and I think our overall relationship with both Pakistan and India is going to be a force for stability in the region, quite frankly," he said.

"When it comes to security we also understand our own responsibility as a sovereign country," he said, vowing to take measures to correct any nuclear "imbalance" that cropped up.

"We will never be oblivious of the requirements of our security," Khan said. "We will continue to make efforts, if such efforts are needed, to maintain that deterrence."

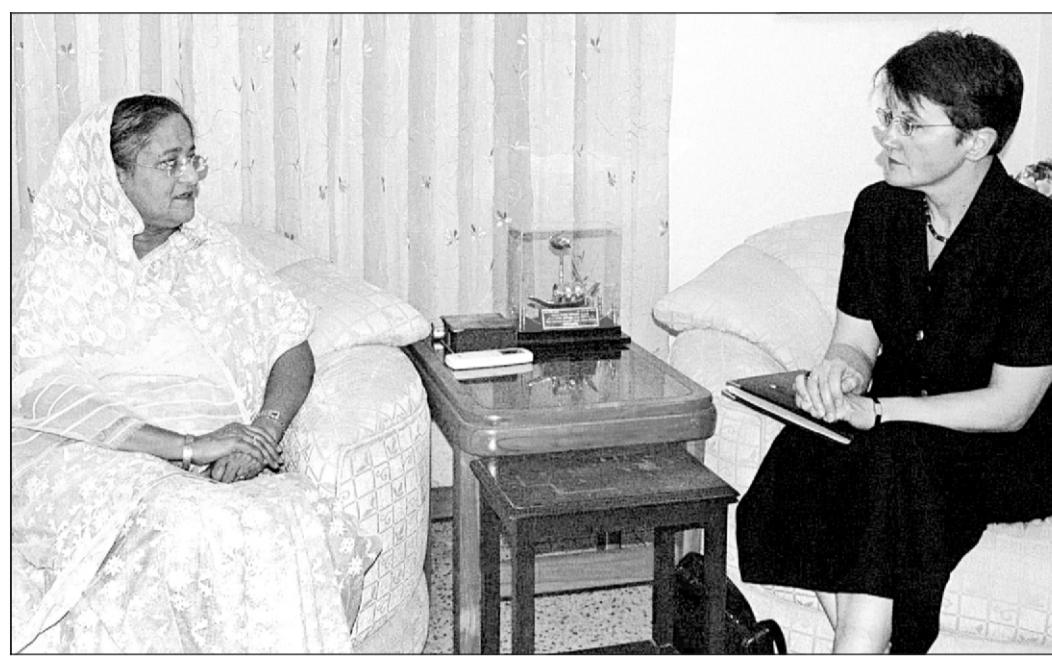


PHOTO: STAR

New US ambassador Patricia Butenis holds a meeting with opposition leader and Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina at the latter's residence yesterday.

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