

France confirms major arms deal with Libya

AFP, Paris

Libya has reached a multi-million dollar arms deal with the European aerospace giant EADS, in what would be the first such purchase since a weapons embargo was lifted on Tripoli in 2004.

French Defence Minister Herve Morin confirmed Friday that a letter of intent had been signed for the sale of Milan anti-tank missiles and a radio communications system worth, according to a Libyan official, 296 million euros (405 million dollars).

News of the deal was set to spark controversy, coming the week after French President Nicolas Sarkozy and his wife Cecilia played a key role in brokering the release of six foreign medics sentenced to life imprisonment in Libya.

The five Bulgarian nurses and Palestinian doctor were flown home last week after an eight-year incarceration on charges of deliberately infecting hundreds of Libyan children with the AIDS virus.

Sarkozy, who travelled to Tripoli a day after they were freed, presented their release as a success of French

and European diplomacy and has denied any link to an arms deal.

Morin said the missile accord was "an agreement between a company and a country," which had been in the negotiating pipeline for months.

But Libyan officials have sought to cast it as a state-to-state deal with France, marking Tripoli's return to the international fold. France owns 15 percent of EADS -- the largest public stake in the consortium.

Libyan leader Muammer Gaddafi's son, Saif ul-Islam Gaddafi, said in an interview published Wednesday in a case had paved the way for the signing of major arms contracts.

During Sarkozy's visit, France and Libya signed a memorandum pledging to cooperate on nuclear energy projects, and a military agreement whose contents were not made public.

Emerging details of the arms accord have sparked an uproar in France where the leader of the opposition Socialist Party, Francois Hollande, called for a parliamentary enquiry to decide if the government

behaved inappropriately.

"If there was no exchange, if there was no bartering, why sign a military agreement with the Gaddafi regime, which has been responsible for terrorist acts, which has been a rogue state?" he asked.

"How can we accept that in a democracy Nicolas Sarkozy wants to be transparent it should be Gaddafi's son who informs us of the signature of an arms contract, when the foreign minister knows nothing of it and the defence minister is still talking of a 'letter of intent'?" Hollande said.

France's defence minister said the missile sale to Libya had been approved by the government of Sarkozy's predecessor Jacques Chirac.

"When you have been in talks for months and months, when a French interministerial committee says, in February 2007, 'we agree to this sale', then it is logical for the deal to go ahead," Morin said.

The Libyan purchases were agreed with subsidiaries of EADS, which is controlled by French and German public and private interests, and of Britain's BAE Systems.

50 dead after Sierra Leone boat capsizes

AFP, Freetown

At least 50 people are dead and 148 others are missing after a coastal ferry capsized overnight in rough seas off northern Sierra Leone, a port official said yesterday.

"According to the report we received, 50 people perished, two were rescued while 148 others remain unaccounted for," the official, who asked not to be named for protocol reasons, told AFP.

A local radio reporter in the area confirmed the accident.

The boat met "hostile weather near a coastal village called Bailor at 10:00 pm (2200 GMT) resulting in the catastrophe", Alex Koroma, a station manager for Radio Kolenten, told AFP by telephone from the region bordering Guinea.

The ports authority official in the capital said the boat was heading from Freetown to Rokumi village when it ran into a storm.

The vessel, named Amunafa and powered by outboard motors, regularly ferries goods and people between Sierra Leone's coastal towns and villages.

At the time of the accident, it also had in addition to the 200 passengers, some 300 huge bags of rice on board.

Sanjay Dutt to take 'aptitude' test for prison work

AFP, New Delhi

Jailed Bollywood star Sanjay Dutt will be given an "aptitude test" to decide what manual work he should perform in prison, a report said yesterday.

Dutt, who was jailed on Tuesday for illegal weapons possession in connection with the 1993 Mumbai blasts, could work in the laundry, bakery, printing press, carpentry shop or do other tasks, the Press Trust of India reported.

"Normally we ask for the preferences of prisoners and try to know their aptitude before assigning them daily work," the news agency quoted an unnamed jail source as saying.

Dutt is being held in Yeravada Jail near the western Indian city of Pune.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian villagers use a handmade raft to navigate through floodwaters near their homes in the village of Golukganj in Dhubri district, some 325 km east of Guwahati. The flood situation in Assam has reached a critical level with some 600,000 people in 12 districts reeling under the swirling waters of the River Brahmaputra and its tributaries.

Flood victims desperate for food, water in India

AFP, Darbhanga

The noise of a hovering helicopter quickly draws villagers in eastern India, desperate for food and fresh water, from their partly flooded huts.

But hopes that relief has arrived are soon dashed as the chopper, loaded with emergency supplies, turns away, its crew deciding for safety reasons against landing in driving rain.

"There is just nothing left to eat," said drenched farmer Ashish Thakur in submerged Kaanti village in Darbhanga district.

"Even the relief helicopters are not landing anymore," he said.

"People are fighting for food like dogs, I have no strength left," the farmer wept, hugging his two hungry children and shivering wife.

Darbhanga is among the 14 worst-hit districts in the poverty-ridden state of Bihar where nearly seven million people have been struck by annual monsoon floods that have engulfed thousands of villages.

"We anticipated some floods and stored some food stocks but it was impossible for us to imagine in advance that it would be so bad," Darbhanga administrator Upendra Sharma told AFP.

Some 700 of Darbhanga's 1,200 villages are "fully or partly submerged" affecting around 2.1 million people, the official said in his headquarters in Darbhanga district town, where foliage-laden muddy water was surging in.

The annual monsoon regularly

brings flooding to the subcontinent but this year has seen some of the worst in recent times, claiming over 1,100 lives.

The death toll caused by monsoon rains in India topped the 1,000 mark on Friday with new victims reported from northern Uttar Pradesh state, officials said.

Twenty-one deaths occurred overnight in three eastern Uttar Pradesh districts hardest hit by the heavy flooding, relief commissioner Umesh Sinha told AFP.

The figures brought to 1,028 the number of people reported killed nationwide in the annual torrential rains that begin in June and last until September, according to figures from officials and media reports.

Glasgow terror suspect dies from burns

AP, London

A man critically burned after allegedly crashing an explosive-laden Jeep into Glasgow Airport died of his injuries Thursday, Strathclyde Police said.

Kafeel Ahmed, 27, had been in the hospital for a month with burns from the alleged attack on June 30, which followed a day after two failed car bombings in London. The other man in the car, Iraqi doctor Bilal Abdullah, has been charged with conspiring to set off explosions.

"We can confirm that the man seriously injured during the course of the incident at Glasgow Airport on Saturday June 30 has died in Glasgow Royal Infirmary," said a spokesman for Strathclyde Police, speaking on condition of anonymity in line with force policy.



PHOTO: AFP

An aerial view shows vehicles rest on a collapsed section of the I35W bridge on Thursday in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Divers combed the dark, debris-strewn waters of the Mississippi river Thursday searching for up to 30 people missing after a major bridge collapsed at rush hour.

Rough river stymies recovery in US bridge collapse

AFP, Minneapolis

The murky, swirling waters of the Mississippi river hampered the search for victims of a disastrous bridge collapse, amid warnings about the decrepit state of America's infrastructure.

Divers only managed to recover a single body on Thursday, bringing the death toll to five from Wednesday's tragedy.

The man was recovered from a car on the part of the bridge, which was partially submerged in the river, a law enforcement source told AFP.

Authorities said it was a frustrating day of searching where rescuers could see, but not reach, other bodies trapped in the wreckage of the collapsed bridge just east of downtown Minneapolis, Minnesota.

At least eight people were reported still missing early Friday.

Pakistan slams Obama for attack comments

AP, Islamabad

Pakistan criticised US presidential candidate Barack Obama on Friday for saying that, if elected, he might order unilateral military strikes against terrorists hiding in this Islamic country.

Top Pakistan officials said Obama's comment was irresponsible and likely made for political gain in the race for the Democratic nomination.

"It's a very irresponsible statement, that's all I can say," Pakistan's Foreign Minister Khusheed Kasuri told AP Television News. "As the election campaign in America is heating up we would not like American candidates to fight their elections and contest elections at our expense."

Obama said in a speech Wednesday that as president he would order military action against terrorists in Pakistan's tribal region bordering Afghanistan if intelligence warranted it. The comment provoked anger in Pakistan, a key ally of the United States in its war on terror.

Many analysts believe that top Taliban and al-Qaeda leaders, including Osama bin Laden, are hiding in the region after escaping the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001.



PHOTO: AFP

Activists of the party of former Pakistani prime minister Nawaz Sharif hold pictures of party leaders Nawaz Sharif (R) and Javed Hashmi (L) as they shout slogans in front of the Supreme Court building in Islamabad yesterday after the court ordered the release of Hashmi. Pakistan's Supreme Court ordered the release of the Hashmi, a senior opposition leader who was jailed in 2004 on treason charges for criticising the army, party officials said.

Nepal Maoist leader rejects minister's resignation

AFP, Kathmandu

The leader of Nepal's former rebel Maoists rejected yesterday the resignation of one of his ministers who complained of a lack of cooperation from his government partners.

One of five Maoists given ministerial roles in April, forestry minister Matrika Yadav submitted his resignation letter Thursday.

But Maoist supremo Prachanda, whose nom de guerre means "the fierce one", said the resignation did not have his party's approval.

"Yadhav took back his resignation after our leader Prachanda told him that it went against our party's policy," Barsha Man Pun, a Maoist Central Committee member, told AFP.