

## INDIA INKS WEAPONS DEAL WORTH \$2 BN WITH ISRAEL

**NEW DELHI:** India will buy nearly \$2 billion worth of weapons technology from Israel in what's being described as the "largest defense contract" ever signed by the military exporting giant. The deal will see state-owned Israel Aerospace Industries provide India with an advanced defense system of medium-range surface-to-air missiles, launchers and communications technology, the company said in a statement Thursday.

The "mega" missile agreement is "considered to be the largest defense contract in Israel's defense industries' history", the company said. The Israeli firm will also supply a naval defense system including long-range surface-to-air missiles for India's first aircraft carrier, which is still under construction. Comment was not immediately available from India's defense ministry. Israel Aerospace Industries said some components will be assembled in India, in line with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's push to reduce reliance on costly imports.

Modi's government has raised the limit on foreign investment in the defense sector and encouraged tie-ups between foreign and local companies under a 'Make in India' campaign. India—the world's largest defense importer—has been investing tens of billions in updating its Soviet-era military hardware to counter long-standing tensions with regional rivals China and Pakistan. India has signed several big-ticket defense deals since Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party stormed to power in 2014.

Israel is a top weapons exporter, with sales last year surging to \$6.5 billion. India is a top market for its arms, as New Delhi has turned increasingly away from traditional ally Russia for its military hardware. Last year India signed a contract to buy 36 Rafale twin-engine fighter jets from France for 7.9 billion euros (\$8.8 billion) after major delays and obstacles over the cost and assembly of the planes in India.—AFP



**YANGON:** Myo Yan Naung Thein, center, a researcher for Aung San Suu Kyi's ruling party, talks to the media after a hearing at court in Yangon yesterday.—AFP

## INDIA'S RESCUED BONDED LABORERS REBUILD LIVES IN DREAM HOMES

**CHENNAI, India:** Born into debt bondage, S Appu spent 25 years confined to a rice mill in south India, watching his father repay a debt, and then working tirelessly to pay it off himself. When he was freed from the mill in Guduvanchery in Tamil Nadu state in 2015, he did not have a place to call home. "Home had always been the rice mill," Appu, 27, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. "I even married there, all the while unaware that there was a world outside that space."

But today Appu lives in his own house, designed and built by students of Chennai's Madras Christian College as part of a project funded by charities and the government to help rescued bonded laborers get back on their feet. Before moving into a one-room brick house in December, Appu was living in a makeshift shelter on a piece of land given to him and eight other families rescued from the same mill by the Tamil Nadu government.

"We found them living in temporary shelters during the 2015 floods that swept the region," said Jesserson Joel, a 22-year-old student, who helped to build Appu's new home. "They were practically living in the open, unprotected and exposed. They needed shelter." India banned bonded labor in 1976, but it remains widespread, with millions like Appu from the marginalized Dalit and tribal communities working in fields, brick kilns, rice mills, brothels or as domestic workers to pay off debts.

Last year, the government announced plans to rescue more than 18 million bonded laborers by 2030, and increase compensation for rescued workers by fivefold as part of efforts to tackle modern slavery. But without homes, land and jobs, it is easy for rescued workers to slip back into debt bondage, campaigners say. "The compensation amount is given, but for all other welfare schemes, including housing and land, they have to fill in forms and follow procedures," said Sam Jebadurai from the charity International Justice Mission, which works to rescue bonded laborers and help them rebuild their lives. "These take time and many don't follow through."

### Living in tents

When he was asked where he would want to live as a free man by officials that had helped to rescue him, Appu recalls shrugging his shoulders and muttering that "it didn't matter". "Actually, I didn't even know the name of the village my parents came from," he said, sitting on the steps of his new home, watching his daughter smother her face with powder. "And besides, no one had ever asked me what I wanted." —Reuters

## MYANMAR GOVT STAFF SENTENCED TO JAIL FOR CRITICIZING ARMY

### ARMY CHIEF BLAMED FOR DEADLY RAIDS

**YANGON:** An official working for Aung San Suu Kyi's government was sentenced to six months in jail by a Yangon court yesterday for criticizing Myanmar's army chief in a Facebook post. It is the latest verdict to highlight lingering limits on free speech in the young democracy, where the military remains a powerful player despite the end of junta rule. Myo Yan Naung Thein, a researcher for Suu Kyi's ruling party, was arrested in October for urging the head of the army to resign over deadly raids on police posts in the north of Rakhine State.

The attacks, by a militant group claiming to represent Myanmar's stateless Rohingya Muslims, sparked an army crackdown so brutal UN investigators believe it may amount to crimes against humanity. In a Facebook post just days after the October raids, Myo Yan Naung Thein said Senior General Min Aung Hlaing was "shameless" for allowing the raids to happen and called for his resignation. The 43-year-old appeared calm as he heard the verdict read out in Yangon's Kamayut township court yesterday, flanked by military officers.

But he struck a defiant note as he left the court, criticizing the army's continued grip on power even after Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) won the first free elections in half a century in 2015. Under a junta-era constitution the military still controls a quarter of parliament seats and the ministries of home affairs, defense and borders. "It's obvious that we have two groups ruling Myanmar, not only our (elected) government," he told journalists. Myo Yan Naung Thein has been held in jail since his arrest and will be able to walk free in

a few weeks because of time served.

Prosecutions under a controversial online defamation law have soared since the NLD took power in March 2016, targeting both those who have criticized the army and the new civilian administration. The law was originally passed by the previous military-backed government as part of a raft of measures designed to attract foreign investment in Myanmar's telecoms sector. But activists say it is increasingly being used to stifle free speech and criticism of the government, dashing hopes the NLD would usher in a new era of openness

after half a century of repressive military rule. At least 46 cases have been brought over the past year, compared to just seven between when the legislation was passed in 2013 to when the NLD took power. They include cases against two officials from one of the country's biggest media groups, a man who called the president 'crazy' on Facebook and another who wrote curses about the army on his car. Last month a mother launched proceedings against her own son for writing insulting comments about her relationships on Facebook.—AFP

## SIX DEAD, TWO MISSING AS FLOODS HIT KASHMIR

**SRINAGAR:** Six people were killed and two were reported missing in India's northern region of Kashmir yesterday, after heavy rain and snowfall swept the region, setting off avalanches and turning mountain rivers into raging torrents. Helicopters were deployed to rescue people cut off by flash floods that revived memories of 2014, when the Jhelum River flowing through the region's main city, Srinagar, burst its banks, swamping homes and killing 200 people.

Snowfalls triggered multiple avalanches, defense spokesman Rajesh Kalia said. "A post in Batalik sector was buried," he added. "Two out of five soldiers have been rescued. A rescue operation for three soldiers

was in progress and three bodies have been recovered." In the Poonch region, an Indian Air Force helicopter was guided by a soldier holding a flare towards a group of villagers stranded on the far bank of a river. They climbed a rope ladder into the craft, which then flew them to safety.

Rajiv Pandey, senior superintendent of police in Poonch, said 17 people were evacuated from the area. In Srinagar, the summer capital of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, some low-lying districts along the Jhelum were swamped but residents said the river was starting to recede. "We are relieved as the water level is receding and the rains are reducing," said one resident. "We are praying that rain should stop."—Reuters