

International

Indian govt in new dogfight over French fighter jet deal

Opposition calls for a corruption probe

NEW DELHI: India's opposition yesterday called for a corruption probe into a multi-billion-dollar fighter jet deal, raising pressure on Prime Minister Narendra Modi as government lawyers threatened a leading newspaper with legal action for revealing details. New Delhi agreed in 2016 to purchase 36 Rafale jets from France but the deal has been embroiled in misconduct allegations, which resurfaced in the wake of air battles last month with arch-rival Pakistan that raised questions about the capacity of the Indian Air Force.

India and Pakistan both struck each other's territory during the skirmishes. Islamabad said it had shot down two Indian fighters, and New Delhi - while confirming the loss of one of its planes - claimed it had shot down a Pakistani jet. Modi said this week that the result of the brief aerial clash with Pakistan would have been "better" if India had Rafales while accusing the opposition of hampering the deal he signed with Paris at an estimated cost of \$9.4 billion. During a Supreme Court hearing late Wednesday, The Hindu newspaper - which ran a series of reports on the deal - was warned it faces charges under the Official Secrets Act over defense ministry doc-

uments it cited in its coverage.

Attorney General KK Venugopal said the files - which indicated the defense ministry was angry because Modi's office had carried out rival negotiations for the Rafales - had been "stolen". "The government claims that the documents were stolen. Doesn't that mean the documents are authentic?" said Rahul Gandhi, head of the opposition Congress party which has led a longstanding onslaught against the deal. He added: "The PM's name clearly figures in the documents, saying the prime minister's office is carrying out parallel negotiations. Let's have an inquiry into that as well."



A newspaper threatened for revealing details

'No force on earth' French company Dassault initially won a contract negotiated under a Congress-led government in 2012 to supply 126 jets to India, with 18 built in France and the rest in India by state-owned Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL). But during a visit to France in 2015, Modi scrapped the deal, replacing it with an order for 36 jets - all to be built in France.

The new agreement, formally signed in 2016, named Reliance group, a conglomerate owned by billionaire Anil Ambani, as Dassault's local partner. Ambani is reported to be close to the



AHMEDABAD: Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaks during the inauguration of the 'Annapurnadham', a Panch Tatva temple, in Adalaj, some 30 kms from Ahmedabad. —AFP

governing party and Reliance had little experience in the aviation sector. The government has strongly denied any misconduct in its renegotiation of the deal and accuses Congress of undermining national security to win votes. The Hindu published details which indicated the price of the jets had risen because normal procedures were bypassed.

India's attorney-general said an investigation is under way into the newspaper, which has stated it will not reveal where its informa-

tion came from. The Hindu group chairman N. Ram said: "We did not steal the documents from the ministry of defense, we got them from confidential sources and no force on earth can make me or us reveal the source." The Supreme Court is hearing a series of petitions seeking a review of a previous ruling that declined a demand for investigation into the deal. The next hearing is on March 14. The first Rafales for India are scheduled to be delivered in 2019. —AFP

French cardinal convicted of sex abuse cover-up

LYON: The archbishop of Lyon, the most senior French Catholic cleric caught up in the paedophilia scandals that have rocked the church, was convicted of helping covering up abuse and handed a six-month suspended jail term yesterday. Cardinal Philippe Barbarin, who was not in court, was found guilty of failing to report the abuse of a minor between 2014 and 2015. His lawyers announced immediately that he would appeal the judgment. "The reasoning of the court is not convincing," lawyer Jean-Felix Luciani told reporters. "We will contest this decision by all the means possible."

Barbarin, 68, faced long-standing allegations from victims' groups that he failed to report a priest under his authority to police after learning of abuse which took place in the 1980s and 90s. But prosecutors judged that those crimes were beyond the statute of limitations-meaning they were too old to prosecute-and declined to press charges. During the trial, victims accused Barbarin of being aware of the abuse allegations from at least 2010 and then trying to cover up the scandal, under orders from the Vatican, from 2015.

Francois Devaux, who leads a victim's group in Lyon, called Thursday's verdict a "major victory for child protection." The Catholic Church has been roiled in recent years by claims against priests which have come to light in the wake of a global move by victims to go public with evidence. Clerics have been denounced in countries as far afield as Australia, Brazil, Chile, Ireland, and the United States, leading Pope Francis to promise to rid the church of a scourge that has done enormous damage to its standing. —AFP

North Korea's state media airs feature on Trump-Kim summit

SEOUL: North Korea's state media aired a lengthy feature on Kim Jong Un's diplomatic bromance with US President Donald Trump in Hanoi but did not mention that the second summit ended without a deal. The talks between Trump and Kim last week finished abruptly after the pair failed to reach an agreement on walking back North Korea's nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief. In the aftermath, each sought to blame the other's intransigence, with Trump insisting that Pyongyang demanded an end to all sanctions while the North claimed it had only wanted some of the measures eased. Following the stalemate, researchers said this week that Pyongyang was rebuilding the Sohae long-range rocket site after Kim had agreed last year to shutter it as part of confidence-building measures. But the North made no mention of these issues in a 75-minute documentary of Kim's trip to Hanoi aired late Wednesday on the official broadcaster KCTV.

A 10-minute clip displayed the unlikely amity between Trump and Kim - a sequel to their first encounter in Singapore last June - exchanging warm smiles and handshakes as they took a poolside stroll around the gardens of the luxury Metropole Hotel, the venue of the summit. The meeting had reaffirmed that the US and North Korea can overcome their seven decades of hostility, KCTV said, and "open a new future" if they come to negotiations with "a fair proposal".

The feature showed Kim, puffing a cigarette, holding a late-night meeting at his hotel with his aides on the eve of his summit with the US president. KCTV did not refer to the pair's discussions on denuclearization - the key sticking point between Washington and Pyongyang - but said the two had agreed "to continue productive talks to resolve pending issues". —AFP

Indian lawmakers get off on wrong foot in 'shoe brawl'

NEW DELHI: Two lawmakers from India's ruling party were set to be disciplined today after a fight using a shoe as a weapon went viral on social media. The event has caused embarrassment to the Bharatiya Janata Party led Prime Minister Narendra Modi in a country where shoes are considered unclean and using one as a weapon is seen as especially offensive.

Footage of the altercation in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, dubbed the "shoe brawl" by Indian media, shows MP Sharad Tripathi beating state assembly member Rakesh Singh Baghel with his slipper after an argument over the placement of names on a foundation stone for a new project. "I regret the incident and feel bad about it. What happened was against my normal behavior," Tripathi told Reuters partner ANI. Baghel, who retaliated by repeatedly slapping Tripathi, has also apologized for the fight. The BJP's president in Uttar Pradesh, MN Pandey, said both lawmakers had been summoned to the state capital Lucknow and that "strict disciplinary action will be taken". —Reuters