

South Africa re-opens probe of Saab arms bribes

Written by AFP / The Swedish Wire

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South African police re-opened their investigation into a controversial arms deal after Swedish defence group Saab admitted bribes had been paid to clinch a contract, a report said Sunday.

Officials will approach authorities in Sweden and Britain to find out what their investigations have uncovered about allegations of corruption in the 1999 deal for 26 JAS Gripen fighter jets, South Africa's Sunday Times reported.

Saab last month admitted that 24 million rand (\$3.6 million, 2.5 million euros) in bribes had been paid to secure the deal, but blamed its former British partner BAE Systems for making the payoffs.

The Sunday Times said the head of South Africa's elite investigative squad, the Hawks, had sent a letter to parliament's Standing Committee on Public Accounts indicating the investigation would be re-opened, 10 months after the Hawks were sharply criticised for dropping the politically sensitive probe.

"I have already instructed two officials... to approach the relevant authorities in both Sweden (National Anti-Corruption Unit) and the UK (Serious Fraud Office)," Hawks chief Anwar Dramat reportedly wrote.

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"Subject to approval by these authorities, (we) will assess the available information with a view to determine whether there is information which points to crime(s) in South Africa."

The chair of the parliamentary committee, Themba Godi, said re-opening the investigation was a "a brave and correct decision".

"Unless justice is being done and is seen as being done on this matter, it's going to continue to cast a cold shadow over the political landscape of the country," Godi told the Sunday Times.

Saab's admission came after Sweden's TV4 television channel said it had evidence the defence group had promised to pay Fana Hlongwane, then advisor to the South African defence minister, millions of euros in bonuses if Pretoria did not back out of the Gripen deal.

Saab said bribes had been paid in the form of bonuses and salaries between 2003 and 2005 by its South African subsidiary Sanip, which was then controlled by BAE Systems.

The deal provided for the sale of 28 Gripen fighters for 1.6 billion euros, later trimmed to 26 planes. The last is due to be delivered next year.

Allegations of corruption in the multi-billion-dollar programme to modernise South Africa's military after apartheid have threatened to damage the careers of some of the country's top politicians.

In 2005, President Jacob Zuma's former financial adviser, Schabir Shaik, was sentenced to 15 years in prison for charges that included soliciting bribes to Zuma from French arms company Thomson-CSF.

He has since been released on medical parole.

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Efforts to put Zuma on trial for corruption have collapsed, but questions over the arms deal continue to hang over his presidency.

After Zuma won control of the African National Congress in 2007, the ruling party made a successful push to disband the predecessor to the Hawks, the Scorpions, an investigative unit that led the probe against Shaik and also implicated Zuma in questionable deals.

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