

Saab Cashes In

## Trading Weapons While Kashmir Burns

Thursday 3 November 2005, by [SULEHRIA Farooq](#) (Date first published: 31 October 2005).

Patience fellow Kashmiris. Islamabad is buying six high-tech Saab 2000 jets to help you out. 'Why the heck high-tech jets instead of helicopters if Islamabad has Kashmir in mind?' fellow Kashmiris might wonder. Because, the Saab 2000 turbo-propelled aircraft will be fitted with a land surveillance system 'that could have been useful in emergency operations arising from the earthquake in Kashmir'.

True, the system will also help Pakistan face 'different threats' but Islamabad's prime concern was Kashmir since the deal was struck exactly a week after the earthquake hit Kashmir. Costs? What does costs matter when such noble intentions are drawn in. But to satisfy the curiosity of fellow Kashmiris and unpatriotic Pakistanis, one better lay bare the facts. The surveillance system, to be provided by Ericsson, will cost hardly three billion Swedish crowns (SEK 1= Rs. 8). Since the Ericsson surveillance system Erieye operates aboard a Saab 2000 turbo-propelled aircraft, Islamabad is therefore compelled to buy six Saab 2000 worth eight billion Swedish crowns. The figure appears big in Swedish currency. We better do a dollar count. In US dollars, it is merely one billion.

The deal was made public by a mainstream Swedish daily Aftonbladet. Saab/Ericsson would have hushed it up. Aftonbladet, exposing the deal, questioned its relevance since the deal not merely violates Swedish guidelines for arms export but also violates the promise made by ruling Social Democrats back in 1998. Following the nuclear blasts by India and Pakistan, Swedish trade minister Leif Pagrotsky made a public commitment not to sell weapons to India and Pakistan. But even more important is the violation of Swedish guidelines for weapon export, which forbids arms exports to countries running conflicts with other countries or having bad human rights record.

Ironically, the Saab press release issued on October 19 in the wake of Aftonbladet criticism, besides contradicting the prices quoted in Aftonbladet's story, explains how useful the radar system is in situations like the earthquake: 'In the aftermath of the severe earthquake, the system would have been able to play a significant part in the search and rescue operations'. Earlier Saab's statement, issued on October 18, stressed the use of the radar system in fighting 'terrorism'.

The deal was being negotiated for years. One wonders if Islamabad or Saab knew in advance that General Musharraf would be fighting 'terrorism' in Waziristan or that an earthquake would hit Kashmir and 'the system would have been able to play a significant part in the search and rescue operations'.

The Saab statements were meant for domestic consumption. Because an article published on Pakistan government's website infopak.gov.pk 'clarified' that the Kargil conflict long ago convinced Islamabad of Erieye's need. A Reuters story (July 14, 2004) headlined, 'Government seeks Swedish radar system to match India', leaves no doubt regarding the 'humanitarian' and 'anti terrorist' use of Erieye. Datelined Islamabad, Reuters report says: 'Government, concerned over India's plans to acquire a strategic radar system from Israel, is seeking a similar system from Sweden. Air Commodore Sarfraz Ahmed Khan, spokesman for the Pakistan Air Force, said talks were underway

with Sweden over the purchase of an Airborne Early Warning System, but no final decision had been taken. A Swedish embassy spokesman confirmed that the matter came up for discussion when President Pervez Musharraf visited Stockholm. He said a Swedish parliamentary commission, which handles defence-related deals, had approved the sale of the radar system and it was now up to the Pakistani authorities to decide. "I can't say what stage it's at, but the negotiations have been going on for quite some time," he told Reuters'.

To water down the domestic criticism, Saab/Ericsson and Swedish authorities are trying to propagate the 'civil' use of Erieye. But the Swedish Peace and Arbitration Society (SPAS) has another explanation regarding the sale of Saab 2000 and Erieye. The Swedish Peace and Arbitration Society has been, for years, closely following the negotiations and opposing the deal. The September 2004 issue of Pax, SPAS newspaper, asserted: 'Erieye is categorised as airradar and warning system and such systems have been used in many wars across the world'.

Suppose Pax is wrong. Suppose Saab-Islamabad deal is well intentioned. Still, one speculates if it is six Saab jets fitted with Ericsson radar system, worth one billion dollars, that Kashmir needs to recover from the earthquake.

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