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France hails 'historic' jet sale to Egypt despite rights concerns

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France basked Friday in the "historic" first foreign sale of its Rafale fighter jet to Egypt in a contract clinched in a breakneck three months, despite criticism over rights abuses by Cairo.

For Paris the 5.2 billion euro (\$5.9 billion) sale is a rare triumph after six failed attempts to export its flagship multi-role combat jet, but analysts criticised double standards as the delivery of two Mistral-class warships to Russia remains stalled over the Ukraine crisis.

Rights group Amnesty International has slammed the decision to sell 24 Rafale jets and a frigate to a nation it has accused of "alarming" human rights abuses.

President Francois Hollande said the rapid-fire negotiations came because "Egypt wanted a quality aircraft (and) taking into account the threats existing around the country."

He said the jets are crucial for Egypt's efforts to bring about stability at home, where it is battling jihadist insurgents in the Sinai peninsula, and in a troubled region.

Cairo is so pressed to receive the jets that France is diverting three fighters destined for its own airforce for delivery, said Eric Trappier, chief executive of Dassault Aviation which manufactures the jet, in an interview with BFM television.

He called it a "historic day" for the company, which has put tens of billions of euros and nearly three decades of development into the Rafale, the French airforce's prime combat jet.

But one by one attempt to sell the jet to countries such as South Korea, Singapore, Morocco, Switzerland and Brazil have seen the Rafale lose out to foreign competition.

The deal with Egypt is a coup for Dassault, but analysts say it is a decision which required overlooking some serious abuses by a regime which Paris sees as a stable partner in a chaotic region.

With Libya to the west wracked by instability, and the threat from Islamic State-linked jihadists on its eastern flank, Egypt has become a strategic partner to France despite a rights record sullied by President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi's crackdown on opponents.

Didier Billion of the Paris-based Institute of Strategic and International Relations said that after years of failure to sell its jet, "unfortunately France would have accepted selling to any country. . . you can have the best product in the world but if you can't sell it there is no use."

He criticised a "lack of coherence" in France's policy of selling weapons after it delayed the sale of a warship to Russia which Paris accuses of backing the separatists in eastern Ukraine, putting at risk a 1.2-billion-euro contract.

El-Sisi was elected president in May 2014 with 96.91 percent of the vote a year after the ouster of Islamist President Mohamed Morsi following mass protests against his rule.

A subsequent crackdown on Morsi's supporters left at least 1,400 dead and thousands more in jail.

"Unfortunately it is the Egyptian people who pay the price. We can shut our eyes over the rights situation in Egypt but we can't shut our eyes over Russia, because Russia is at the centre of an international power struggle," said Billion.

"We can see morals and international relations don't mix well."

French Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian will head to Cairo on Monday to sign the contract, and the first delivery is due this year of the fighter jets which had been destined for the French airforce, while a frigate destined for the French marines will instead be sold to Egypt.

The country is hoping the long-awaited sale will create a snowball effect and see more buyers clamouring for its flagship fighter jet.

Dassault's Trappier said he was "very confident" that three years of exclusive talks with India on the sale of 126 Rafales worth 12 billion euros would result in a deal.

He said talks were slow as India wanted some of the jets manufactured at home in a bid to boost defence manufacturing, meaning the details of every nut and bolt had to be agreed upon.

France is also eyeing deals with Qatar and Malaysia.