

Malaysia only talking to Dassault about jets

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By Reuters

Only bilateral negotiation taking place now with no other party talking to Malaysia over purchase of combat aircraft, says French government.

PARIS: Malaysia, which wants to buy up to 18 combat planes in a deal potentially worth more than US\$2 billion (RM8.8 billion), is now talking to only one supplier, France's Dassault Aviation, about its Rafale jets, a French government spokesman said on Thursday.

"Negotiations have started. I believe there are now only negotiations with Dassault about the Rafale," Stephane Le Foll told reporters in a briefing after a cabinet meeting.

Pressed by Reuters on whether Dassault was the only manufacturer left in the running, Le Foll said: "There is now only a bilateral negotiation. There is no other operator."

Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak said on Tuesday that he had discussed the possible purchase of Rafale fighters with Francois Hollande during the French president's visit to Kuala Lumpur earlier this week, but the government was not yet ready to make a decision.

Malaysian Defence Minister Hishammuddin Hussein was reported in the media recently as saying the race for new fighter jets had narrowed to the Rafale and the Eurofighter Typhoon, built by Britain's BAE Systems.

Dassault Aviation declined comment on Le Foll's remarks. BAE Systems had no immediate comment.

A source in Malaysia's defence ministry said last week that the Rafale was emerging as the frontrunner in the contest.

Malaysia plans to replace the Royal Malaysian Air Force's squadron of Russian MiG-29 combat planes, nearly half of which are grounded.

France had struggled for years to secure its first foreign order for the Rafale. However, since making a breakthrough with a 2015 deal to sell 24 of the multi-role combat jets to Egypt, it has notched up several other orders.

In May 2015, France and Qatar concluded a €6.3 billion deal for the sale of 24 Rafales and last September, India signed a deal to buy 36 Rafales for around US\$8.7 billion, the country's first major acquisition of combat planes in two decades.

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