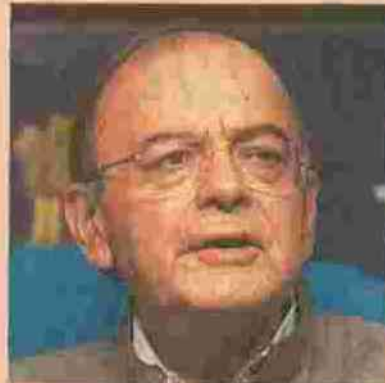


Won't scrap Rafale deal: Jaitley

ARCHIS MOHAN
New Delhi, 23 September

Finance Minister (FM) Arun Jaitley on Sunday said former French president François Hollande's initial statement on the Rafale fighter jet deal was "highly questionable", lacked credibility, and made with the sole purpose of stoking controversy.

He said Hollande's statement to news agency *Agence France-Presse* on Saturday contradicted his earlier statement on the subject, and pointed to Congress President Rahul Gandhi's tweet of August 30 to suggest the entire episode was orchestrated to malign the



Finance Minister Arun Jaitley

Narendra Modi government.

Jaitley said Hollande had initially stated that Dassault Aviation entered into a partnership with Reliance Defence at the suggestion of the Indian government, but contradicted

it later. The FM interpreted the former French president's second statement to mean that neither of the governments had any role in the selection of Reliance Defence.

In a statement issued to the media on Sunday afternoon, Jaitley said Reliance Group (of industrialist Mukesh Ambani) was a part of the Rafale deal since 2012, but dropped out of defence production, and the other Reliance Group (of industrialist Anil Ambani) was already in defence.

He said the Reliance groups are not partners in the Rafale deal. He said they have no contract with either the Government of India or the

Government of France. Dassault and Reliance selected themselves, Jaitley said. The FM said Hollande has admitted to as much in his second statement.

"Koi prashna nahi uthta. Ye fauj ki avashaktya hai. Ye desh mei ana chahiye, aur ye ayega.

(No question of scrapping the deal. These (jet fighters) are needed by the defence forces. They should come and they will come)," Jaitley said, when asked whether the government could cancel the deal in view of the forthcoming general elections in 2019. In reply, Gandhi tweeted: "Mr. Jetlie's specialty is his ability to spin two truths, or lies, with fake righteousness and indignation to defend the inde-

fensible. It is high time, he, the defence minister, and our Prime Minister stop lying and call a JPC (joint parliamentary committee) probe to establish the full, uncorrupted truth about the Rafale scam" (sic).

Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed a public rally in Jharkhand to launch his government's ambitious health insurance scheme, while Bharatiya Janata Party chief Amit Shah addressed a public rally in Delhi. Neither of them referred to the Rafale controversy in their respective speeches.

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