



Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman at The Economist conclave in Mumbai on Thursday. Amit Chakravarty

Cong misleading nation on Rafale deal: Sitharaman

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
MUMBAI, OCTOBER 25

UNION DEFENCE Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Thursday said the Congress was "brazenly misleading" the nation on the Rafale fighter aircraft deal.

While asserting that all questions related to the 36 Rafale jets that India was procuring from France and the offset contract awarded to Anil Ambani's Reliance Defence had been adequately answered by the government, including in Parliament, Sitharaman said the Congress campaign to sow suspicion in the minds of people won't succeed.

Sitharaman was addressing *The Economist* conclave in Mumbai Thursday. "The Opposition has been asking questions and we have been answering questions. We have not ducked any question nor deterred anybody from asking questions. Because we are answering, they are moving from one mile post to another. First, they asked the base price of the aircraft. Then with ammunition. Or compared to aircraft which they brought. God knows when. Then moved to offset, a policy which was made during their time."

"The selection of the offset partner was a commercial decision, which was taken by the original equipment maker (OEM). It was purely their business," she said.

Sitharaman indicated that investments in the country's defence sector had got a positive response under Make In India. "Defence procurements have remained too complicated, complex, time-consuming and there-

fore, because they are not black and white, they can remain opaque. This results in suspicion in the minds of people. After our government came to power, PM's (Narendra Modi) insistence has been on transparent processes, cutting out everything that is discretionary, driving it from a policy rather than personal interest in the system," she said.

Sitharaman said Dassault Aviation along with two-three other companies were participating in the Rafale procurement. "So each one of them will have an offset obligation to be fulfilled. Now, offset obligations for each one of them will be fulfilled through various vendors in India. In which case, they would be buying some products from them or through various investments or joint ventures...," she said.

"Till the time, each and everyone comes and claims their offset obligations, I will not know whether they are with one or ten or hundred companies," she explained.

The commencement of delivery itself has not begun on Rafale, she said. Moreover, there are set procedures in the Defence Ministry through which it will go to see that the claims are right, she added.

On Indo-US defence ties following the S-400 deal with Russia, she said, "Buying the S-400 missile from Russia is a choice that India makes. And we are very clean on that and we made our side of the decision very clear. And I am also very grateful in the sense and happy that Americans, as represented by the Secretary of Defense position, they understood why India had to go ahead with some of our purchases."