

# 'Battle Of Agusta' Rages Between BJP, Congress

NEW DELHI: The political slugfest over the VVIP chopper deal case on Monday intensified with BJP chief Amit Shah accusing the Gandhi family of having "deep friendship" with arrested AgustaWestland middleman Christian Michel, while the Congress accused the Narendra Modi government of misusing central agencies to pursue its "vendetta politics".

The last day of the year witnessed the Centre's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) launching a frontal attack on UPA Chairperson Sonia Gandhi and Congress President Rahul Gandhi after the Enforcement Directorate (ED), which is probing the multi-crore rupees AgustaWestland choppers deal case, told a special court that Michel referred to one "Mrs Gandhi" and "big man 'R'", perceived as being Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi.

Taking to Twitter, Shah alleged that "the friendship between Michel and one family in India is time-tested and deep".

"Does anyone know why Christian Michel passed on the details of questioning on Mrs Gandhi to his lawyer? Did he want them to be passed on to Mrs Gandhi herself? Why?" asked Shah.

The BJP President demanded Michel's lawyer Aljo Joseph -- a former Youth Congress leader --



An AgustaWestland helicopter of the Indian Air Force. Inset is middleman Christian Michel.

to "reveal about the existence of documents of 2008, which make a reference to Mrs Gandhi".

Shah called Joseph a "conduit between Michel and Mrs Gandhi" and said his expulsion by the Congress was a "sham".

"Michel's lawyer has admitted that the paper was indeed passed on to him. He thought that it was a list of medicines, which could have been transparently given in any case," said Shah and took a swipe at the Gandhi family saying people have heard of the Zandu Balm and Tiger Balm -- medicines used to relieve pain -- but what is this "family balm".

Countering the Congress' onslaught on the Modi government

over alleged irregularities in the Rafale jets deal, the BJP also fielded its Chief Ministers to launch a multi-pronged attack.

If Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis demanded the Congress and the Gandhi family to reply to the corruption charges made against them, his Uttar Pradesh counterpart Yogi Adityanath sought to know "Who is this Mrs Gandhi that Michel is talking about?".

"The Congress has benefited from Michel, which has been brought forth by the ED. The Congress and the Gandhi family must clarify," said Fadnavis wondering why the name of "only one family" keeps recurring in all

defence deals involving corruption charges.

Retaliating to the BJP's charges, former Defence Minister and Congress veteran A.K. Antony accused the Modi government and the BJP of "manufacturing lies" to malign the Gandhi family and asserted that neither Sonia nor Rahul ever interfered in any defence deals.

"Lies, lies and lies... the Modi government and the BJP are trying to manufacture something out of nothing, they are misusing the agencies to manufacture lies. I want to say categorically that Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi never interfered in defence deals," Antony told the media

here.

"Without any iota of truth, they are pursuing a politics of vendetta. At no point either Sonia Gandhi or Rahul Gandhi interfered in my functioning as the Defence Minister," said Antony who was at the helm of the Defence Ministry from 2006 to 2014.

Antony also attacked the Modi government for "favouring" the AgustaWestland, which was blacklisted by the earlier Congress-led UPA government.

"As soon as we came to know about corruption in the deal, we ordered a CBI inquiry. We fought against Agusta in Italy courts and blacklisted the company.

"But after we left, the present government has done nothing against Agusta. Instead, they are favouring the company by making them a partner in 'Make in India'. Instead of following up on the action by the UPA and punishing Agusta, the present government is favouring them," alleged Antony.

Following Michel's extradition from the the United Arab Emirates earlier this month, the BJP has been on the offensive against the Congress and the Gandhi family with Prime Minister Modi himself alleging that the British national has taken Sonia Gandhi's name and will "spill the beans" about the deal.

## Afghan Forces Fight IS; Taliban Kill 15 Cops

KABUL: Afghan special forces launched a new offensive against the Islamic State group in eastern Nangarhar province, killing 27 militants, officials said. Meanwhile, Taliban attacks in northern Afghanistan killed 15 members of the country's security forces.

According to provincial council member Ajmal Omar, the special forces, backed by helicopter gunships, targeted IS in Achin district of Nangarhar on Monday. The province has been an IS stronghold and the site where the militant group's regional branch first emerged a few years ago.

The militants' media arm, the Aamaq news agency, claimed IS repulsed a joint Afghan-U.S. operation in the area.

Omar, who could not confirm whether U.S. troops took part in the operation, said two local IS leaders, Sediq Yar and Syed Omar, were among those killed. The remoteness of the area makes it impossible to independently in-

vestigate conflicting reports.

In the north, the Taliban launched two blistering attacks on police outposts in Sar-e-Pul province on Monday night, killing 15 policemen and wounding 21, the latest in near-daily assaults by the insurgents against Afghanistan's beleaguered security forces.

Fierce gunbattles raged for several hours in Sayyad district and outside Sar-e-Pul, the provincial capital. In the attack on the outskirts of the city, heavy artillery fire by Afghan forces trying to repel the Taliban sent local residents fleeing for safety, said provincial council chief Mohammad Noor Rahmani.

Taliban spokesman Qari Yousof Ahmadi claimed responsibility for both attacks in Sar-e-Pul province.

The Taliban have been carrying out near-daily attacks targeting Afghan forces despite stepped-up efforts by the United States to find a negotiated end to the country's 17-year war.

## Bangladesh PM Wins Again

DHAKA: Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has secured a new term with a landslide victory, the country's Election Commission said on Monday, in an election marred by deadly violence and condemned by the opposition as "farce" amid vote rigging claims.

Hasina's ruling Awami League (AL) party and its allies won a total of 288 of the 300 parliamentary seats contested in Sunday's poll, well above the 151 seats needed to form a government. With this tally, the AL surpassed its previous election wins, making Hasina the Prime Minister for an unprecedented fourth term.

The opposition alliance led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) of jailed former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia took just seven seats and condemned the vote as "farce". They demanded a new vote.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi called Hasina over telephone and congratulated her on the victory. "Wished her the very best for the tenure ahead," he tweeted. Modi also reiterated

India's continued commitment to work together for the development of Bangladesh and further strengthening of relations.

Chinese President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Li Keqiang extended their congratulations to the Bangladeshi leader.

Bangladesh's Parliament has 350 seats in total, 50 of which are reserved for women and allotted proportional to the overall vote.

Chief Election Commissioner KM Nurul Huda said there was an 80 per cent voter turnout in the 11th national parliamentary elections. Voting was suspended at 16 of the over 40,000 polling centres.

BNP's Secretary-General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir called the election "a cruel joke with the nation" and said that the party's decision to stay away from the general election five years ago was not wrong.

"The so-called participatory election has caused long-term damage to the nation," he said, adding, that "many think that the BNP was wrong not to join the 2014 election. Today's election

has proved that it was not a wrong decision at all."

There were claims of "irregularities" in 221 of the 300 seats involved in the contest. The opposition Jatiya Oikya Front also rejected the vote.

However, the demand to conduct fresh polls were rejected by the poll body. "To the claims of large-scale irregularities, the boycott of the vote and the demand for fresh polls I say: 'No, we will not hold a new election. There is no scope for a new election'," said Election Commissioner Huda.

## Modi Renames Three Islands In The Andamans



PORT BLAIR: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday hailed the people of Car Nicobar for their spirit and hard work in rebuilding the islands after the 2004 tsunami and said that projects unveiled in the island city would go a long way in developing several sectors.

Modi, who was on two-day visit to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, also laid the foundation stone for shore protection work near Mus Jetty, and extension of Campbell Bay Jetty.

Earlier, Addressing a public event to mark the 75th anniversary of the hoisting of Tricolour on Indian soil by Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, Modi also announced the renaming of three islands.

Ross Island would now be called Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Dweep; Neil Island would be known as Shaheed Dweep;

and Havelock Island would be renamed as Swaraj Dweep, he said.

He laid a wreath at the Martyrs Column, visited the Cellular Jail and offered floral tributes at the statue of Bose. He also released a commemorative postal stamp, coin, and First Day Cover.

Speaking after inaugurating an industrial training institute at Arong, Modi remarked: "Today in Car Nicobar, we inaugurated and laid the foundation stone for several development works. These projects, relating to education, healthcare, skill development, transportation, energy and sports, will go a long way in developing the sectors."

He also interacted with tribal chiefs and eminent sportspersons from the islands and said that "the upcoming ITI will greatly benefit youngsters".

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