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زبان های اروپایی

Pajhwok

## Diplomat involved in shady plane deal gets cabinet slot

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KABUL - A former Afghan president illegally ordered the sale of a state-run Ariana Airline aircraft, bought for 30 million US dollars from Russia in 1980, to Iran's Caspian Company at a throwaway price of \$450,000.

The shady deal involved a former diplomat, Engineer Abdu Rahim Syed Jan, who has now been named by President Hamid Karzai as his minister-designate of refugee affairs, reveal investigations conducted by Pajhwok Afghan News.

Capt Moin Khan Wardak, president of the Ariana Airlines, confirmed the company had paid 60 million dollars to purchase two Russian-made TU-154M planes. One of them was sold almost \$29.5 million cheaper than its market price.

Capable of flying at a maximum altitude of 39,000 feet, carrying a weight of 100 tonnes and up to 180 people, the Soviet tri-jet airliner is similar to the Boeing 727. It had been the mainstay of the Russian airlines for several decades.

In compliance with orders from the Mujahideen president, Prof. Burhanuddin Rabbani, the Afghan consul-general in Mashhad received just 450,000 dollars as the sale price of a plane that cost the state exchequer \$30 million.

Asked why he gave consent to an agreement that inflicted a huge loss on the impoverished country, the former president came up with no logical answer. He tended to sweep the issue under the carpet, remarking there no point in discussing the nine-years-old matter today.

It remains a mystery what happened to the sale money and why the government of the day agreed to accept a dirt-cheap price for the plane. The amount was never deposited in the government exchequer, disclosed an insider, who did not want to be named.

But Abdul Rahim, who did acknowledge the receipt of \$450,000 from the Iranian airline, insisted he duly deposited the sum in the account of the Afghan Consulate in Mashhad in line with President Rabbani's directive.

The amount was later transferred to a Russian company, tasked with printing banknotes for the Mujahideen government, he said, claiming possession of documentary evidence of the transactions. He repeatedly asserted his integrity as a government functionary, who took every step in accordance with orders from his superiors.

The aircraft was parked at the Mazar-i-Sharif Airport on May 27, 1997, when Northern Alliance forces recaptured the airfield from Taliban. The same year, the plane was flown to Tehran, where it was sold to the Caspian Airlines on January 2, 2001.

Rabbani, who used Mazar-i-Sharif as the centre of his interim government after the fall of Kabul to the Taliban, specifically tasked a former diplomat with concluding the fishy sale agreement nine years ago.

According to Letter No 025, dated June 2000, Rabbani's consul-general in Mashhad Abdul Rahim Syed Jan was authorised to sell the TU-154M aircraft with serial number 85748 and CAO side number EP-CPG for the contract.

Pajhwok has obtained a copy of the letter, which reads: Brother Engineer Abdu Rahim, consul-general of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in Mashhad, is hereby introduced as a diplomat authorised to negotiate the aircraft deal"

The agreement signed between Caspian Airlines Managing Director Mahmoud Rajabian and the Afghan consul-general explicitly says the price of the aircraft was more than \$3,303,500. However, it adds, the representative of the Afghan government was fobbed off with \$450,000 only.

"Each page of the documents that I have is duly signed by the erstwhile president," added Rahim, who contended that the money could not be transferred to the Kabul-based Da Afghanistan Bank, then controlled by the Taliban, after the toppling of the Rabbani administration in 1996.

A sum of \$726,000 was expended by the Caspian Airlines on repairs of the aircraft in Ukraine, according to the agreement that also involved Afghan representative Eng. Shah Jehan, now an employee of the national flag-carrier.

In March 2000, the Caspian Airlines reportedly spent an amount of \$2,172,500 on the complete overhaul of the aircraft in Russia (Varz-400 Factory) in the presence of Rouki Naeimi, then a representative of the Afghan government.

But both Jehan and Naeimi, currently working for the Ariana Airlines, denied any payments were made in their presence on account of the plane's repairs and checks.

Jehan confirmed flying the airplane from Mazar-i-Sharif to Tehran and to Ukraine three months later. The official said he stayed in Ukraine only for three days and discussed with Caspian Airlines officials when they would change the Ariana aircraft logo.

"No checks on the aircraft were needed in Ukraine and they were done without my consent. Even if it (aircraft) needed any check, the cost should not have exceeded \$100, 000," observed Jehan.

Living in Mashhad at that time, Jehan said he was asked to corroborate repair vouchers worth more than \$700,000. This happened seven months after he returned to Mashhad. However, the Ariana official claimed he refused to do so.

Approached for comments, Naeimi said he was sent to Russia by the Afghan embassy in India to bring back the aircraft that was under repair in a Moscow factory.

But he failed to do so, because the Afghan embassy in Russia had no authority to inspect the aircraft flown to Moscow by Iranian officials. Without going into details, he added the plane had been flown to Russia and Ukraine illegally.

Jamaluddin, pilot of the plane, said he was detained along with 12 crewmembers after flying from Kandahar to Mazar-i-Sharif on May 26, 1997. Gen. Malik's supporters seized the crew after they took the city from Taliban. However, they were freed five months later.

General Malik, then foreign minister who had driven Taliban fighters from Mazar-i-Sharif, admitted letting the plane leave for Iran to avoid its destruction in possible bombardments of the Mazar airport by the Taliban aircraft.

Contacted on the issue as foreign minister of the time, he denied playing any role in the unauthorised sale of the aircraft. Instead he asked Pajhwok to approach the ex-president for further queries.

But Jehan accused Gen. Malik of being involved initially in dealing with the Caspian Airlines. But when he lost control of Mazar-i-Sharif to Taliban, the Iranian airlines turned the militia regime for wrapping up the underhanded transaction.

Naseem Faqiri, an official of the Jamiat-i-Islami Party led by ex-president Rabbani, said he did not have detailed information about the deal sealed by a government duly recognised by the United Nations.

Days after Rabbani took over as president following the collapse of the Taliban regime, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs formally contacted the Iranian authorities on the aircraft's fate.

In an official communication, dated Oct 23, 2001, the Iranian government was urged to return the plane. "As you know, the (TU-154M) aircraft owned by Ariana Airlines is parked at Mashhad airport we respectfully request you to contact the officials concerned for its return."

Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, acting minister of foreign affairs, dispatched a formal letter to the Iranian Foreign Ministry on December 4, 2001. Abdullah hailed Iranian authorities for their constant cooperation while seeking the return of the aircraft to the Ariana Airlines.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs received a formal response from Iran, which argued the aircraft had been sold to it under the direction of former president and Eng. Abdul Rahim acknowledged receiving \$450,000. On Dec 19, 2001, the Afghan embassy in Tehran also forwarded the letter from Eng. Rahim, consul-general.

The Ariana Airlines and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were responsible for pursuing the case of the aircraft, illegally sold to Iran, but they have since been tight-lipped on the sordid affair.

Ghulam Farooq Mangal, deputy director of the Ariana Airlines, verified the illegitimate sale of the aircraft to Iran by Rabbani. He alleged the former president ordered the mysterious dispatch and subsequent sale of the aircraft for reasons best known to him.

The airlines did approach the Iranian Foreign Ministry for details but there had been no positive response, he complained. The plane once transported passengers for a short period of time to Russia, Iran, Pakistan and Turkey, he recalled.

The second one purchased from Russia was damaged in June 1992 when civil strife broke out in Kabul, Mangal explained. The wreckage still lay at the Kabul International Airport, he continued.

Deputy Pilot Ahmad Shah was wounded in his shoulder and waist when the aircraft was hit with a rocket. He said the incident occurred at a time when the plane was 400 meters up in the air but landed without causing casualties.

Ariana Afghan Airlines was created in January 1955 with a 49 percent government share and a 51 percent private-sector contribution. An American commercial pilot relocated to Afghanistan several war-surplus Dakota aircraft which he had been operating as a private air service in India after the end of World War II.

Prior to that there had been no air service for passengers in Afghanistan, even though the Royal Afghan Air Force had been in existence for some years. The utility of air travel was soon recognised by the Afghan government, and the airline was incorporated more formally as 'Ariana Afghan Airlines.'

Ariana had 25 aircraft soon after its establishment and was recognised as one of the best airlines in the region, but the civil strife beginning in 1980 gradually tarnished its reputation. As a consequence, European countries banned the aircraft at their airports.

Five Ariana aircraft were destroyed during the US invasion of Afghanistan while others crashed due to different technical and security problems in a number of areas inside the country.

Ariana currently operates flights to Turkey, Azerbaijan, Russia, Tajikistan, Iran, the UAE, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, India, China, Pakistan and Germany.