

Military Seeks Bids to Supply 2 Helicopter Ships

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YEREVAN, Armenia — The military will hold an international tender for the supply of two helicopter-carrying warships, Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov said Friday.

Serdyukov said the military intended to pick a supplier of the ships by the end of the year.

"We are talking about two ships for the time being," Serdyukov told reporters in the Armenian capital, where he was accompanying President Dmitry Medvedev on a trip.

Russia has been in talks with France for months on a deal for Mistral-class helicopter carriers, but Serdyukov said earlier this year that it was also in preliminary discussions with Spain and the Netherlands.

The makers of the Mistral are welcome to participate in the tender on equal terms with other bidders, he said Friday. Mistral is built by French naval shipyard DCNS, a quarter owned by defense electronics group Thales.

Serdyukov spoke a day after Russian media cited officials at United Shipbuilding Corporation as saying his ministry planned to hold a tender for the helicopter carriers, inviting both foreign and Russian shipbuilders.

Serdyukov said the tender had already been announced.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy told shipyard workers last month that France would build two ships for Russia. A shipyard executive said at the time that the deal was expected to be sealed by the end of the year.

On Thursday, the French president's office said negotiations were going well and it was not concerned by the latest developments.

Some analysts viewed the tender as Moscow putting mild pressure on Paris in an attempt to win better conditions to buy the Mistral ships from France.

The purchase of two Mistral ships from France is estimated at costing up to 800 million euros (\$1.03 billion).

While they are routinely called helicopter carriers — designed for about 16 helicopters — the vessels are primarily fleet command centers, as well as large hospitals and floating barracks able to accommodate a battalion of marines.

Talks have been complicated by Russia's hopes of acquiring the ships with weapons technology — a prospect that the commander of U.S. naval forces in Europe has said would cause concern.

Georgia and the Baltic states have expressed concern about Moscow's efforts to acquire the French vessels. Russia has said the ships would have helped it in the brief war with Georgia in 2008.

But Konstantin Makiyenko, a defense analyst with the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, said the military needed the ships in its far-flung regions with rundown infrastructure in the Far East, not in the Black or Baltic seas.

He said Georgian fears were "absolutely senseless," given Abkhazia's natural access to the Black Sea. Russia set up bases in Abkhazia and another breakaway Georgian region, South Ossetia, after the 2008 war.

"Russia does not need any landing ships in the Black Sea, if only because it already has an unsinkable aircraft-carrier there called Abkhazia," Makiyenko said.

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