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Mistral and Gorshkov Projects Back on Track

By Alexander Bratersky

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The United Ship Building Corporation has accelerated work on two of its international military-related projects, company sources told Interfax Wednesday.

The upgrade of a former Soviet aircraft carrier for service in the Indian Navy and a project to build a helicopter carrier jointly with France are nearing complication, company officials said.

The state-owned ship building holding is under new management following a move to put Vladimir Shmakov in the role of general director— a post he assumed at the end of May.

Shmakov said during a meeting with Putin at that time that he sees "unconditional fulfillment" of military orders among his primary tasks.

The former president of the United Shipbuilding Corporation, Andrei Dyachkov, was

dismissed in early May after coming under increased pressure from Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin for his lackluster performance. Rogozin oversees the defense industry.

The long awaited aircraft carrier, now named INS Vikramaditya—which translates from the Hindi as Brave as the Sun— is undergoing final testing. Though rescheduled several times, the most recently announced delivery date was November 2013.

Originally built in 1987 for the Soviet Navy and christened the Admiral Gorshkov, the craft has been undergoing modernization since 2004 when a contract worth $1.8 billion to modernize and deliver the ship to the Indian navy was signed between the two countries.

The United Shipbuilding Company subsidiary Sevmash is finishing work on the INS Vikramaditya at its testing facility in Severodvinsk, a company source said.

Over $1 billion of the contract value was allocated to purchase MIG fighter jets and helicopters to be used on the ship by the Indian Navy.

Though work was originally scheduled for completion by 2008, the project has suffered multiple delays, which have led to an increase in costs and brought the total sum of the contract $2.3 billion.

Meanwhile, the United Ship Building source also said Wednesday that its Baltic shipyard in St. Petersburg, which is assembling part of a Mistral helicopter carrier ship under French license, is "finishing preparations," to launch the stern section of the ship and transfer it to France in July for final assembly.

A source told Interfax, that Russia has fulfilled all of the obligations, under the contract, despite "delays" from the French side.

France announced in February 2010 an agreement to sell Russia a Mistral ship, with an option for three more vessels. On June 17, 2011 Russia and France signed a $1.7 billion contract for the joint manufacturing of the first two Mistral ships.

The Russian Defense Ministry said in December that it had postponed the construction of the second two Mistral-class helicopter and will build only the first two.

The Mistral deal was the biggest purchase of foreign arms by the Russian government in the post-Soviet era as well as the first contract on such a scale with a NATO country.

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