

Mystery over arms tender advertisement

by Ravi Ladduwahetty

Controversy looms over the manner in which the advertisement calling for tenders for the supply of military aircraft has been drafted by the Ministry of Defence and the manner in which the entire deal is going to be handled in respect of the six MI-17 helicopters and three AN-32 aircraft.

The mystery revolves as to how the advertisement was drafted to include the brand name of the product, as against generalised product details which could be applicable to any manufacturer!

As a wag quipped, if a tender notice is published inviting bid for Austin Cambridge cars, they could get tenders only from the British Motor Corporation. Mercedes Benz cars could be purchased only from Mercedes Benz AG!!

The advertisement was published first in the local press on Saturday November 19th and according to the advertisement the bid is going to open on November 21st and close on December 8th, leaving prospective bidders a mere 17 days to submit their tenders.

Informed sources also say that it is not realistic as the time frame is too short for the submitting of tender applications. They say

that it takes a minimum of four days to send the tender documents to the overseas supplier by courier and a minimum of another four days for the bid documents to return to the locally accredited agent. With the intermediate holidays, the prospective supplier has only five working days of arranging the bid bonds and putting the package together.

Mystery also revolves over the period the prospective suppliers were provided with only 30 days to supply the said equipment which by any international norm is too short a time frame to supply technical equipment of this nature, said the source. "Nowhere else in the world could a seller supply a package of such sophisticated nature, unless the equipment is readily available and be tailor made to suit a particular individual", they pointed out.

"The Island" also is reliably informed that the controversial Russian arms supplier who was involved in the shady US \$ 72 million arms deal is presently in Sri Lanka and staying at a "5 star hotel" by the lake under very tight security.

The prices they have earlier quoted have been US \$ 4.5 million per AN-32 aircraft and US \$ 0.9 million per MI-17 helicopter. It is also learnt that following President Kumar-

atunga's directive to transact future purchases on a strict tender procedure or on a government to government basis, this deal is said to have the "blessing" of a top defence official and an SLAF official who have told the Russian suppliers not to lower the prices as they are very confident of "clinching the deal". The Russian manufacturer being the only international manufacturer of this category of equipment is also seen as an advantage to suit certain individuals.

However, informed sources reiterate that the AN-32 aircraft could be suppliers at US \$ 3.5 million each and the MI 17 at US \$ 0.9 million. This would mean that if a more practical time frame is allowed to all respective suppliers, the net saving to the government of Sri Lanka is US \$ 4.8 million.

It is also confirmed that the said consignment of arms was to come from Global Omarus Technology (Pvt) Ltd of Singapore — the same company which was involved in the controversial US \$ 72 million arms deal earlier, which was incorporated two days prior to the deal with an authorised share capital of a microscopic three Singapore Dollars!!

The Secretary to the Ministry of Defence — Gen. Hamilton Wanasinghe was not available for comment.