

France Records 13% Rise in Arms Sales

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Paris — France sold 6.58 billion euros (\$9.5 billion) of arms into the world market last year, a 13 percent rise over the previous year, as orders for the A330 air tanker and helicopters fueled a boost in exports, a report to parliament showed Sept. 28.

The orders placed France fourth with a 7.7 percent share of the 2008 world arms market valued at 55 billion euros, Defense Ministry spokesman Laurent Teisseire told a news conference here.

The United States led with 52.3 percent of the world market, followed by Britain with 13.7 percent, and Russia 8.2 percent. Israel is the fifth-largest arms exporter with a 5 percent share.

"A year ago, the question was whether France would hold its position or slip to fifth," Teisseire said. The latest figures showed Paris was consolidating its rank as the fourth-largest arms exporter and stabilizing. "We're starting to climb back," he said.

Britain's position was mainly due to the sale of 72 Eurofighter Typhoon fighters to Saudi Arabia, while France has slid back as Paris has failed to clinch a large fighter deal since the late 1990s when the United Arab Emirates bought 32 Mirage 2000-9 aircraft.

Current export efforts to the gulf region include discussions with Saudi Arabia for three FREMM multimission frigates, a defense executive said.

Among them, West European countries accounted for 19.1 percent of world arms sales, highlighting the importance of harmonizing arms control procedures and the movement of defense goods within the European Union, Teisseire said.

The value of French arms 2008 deliveries totaled 3.17 billion euros so far, compared with 4.6 billion euros in the previous year.

France's medium-term objective is to reach annual sales of 10 billion euros and to equal Britain's record of exports.

Some 57 percent of French exports, worth 3.5 billion euros, came from the aeronautics sector, notably contracts for the A330 MultiRole tanker and transport aircraft to Australia, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, as well as orders for the EC725, NH90 and Tiger helicopters.

A breakdown of the sales figures showed France has reduced reliance on Middle East sales and was selling into South America and Asia, regions from which it has been largely absent

for the last decade or so. Modernization and renovation also helped boost the figures, including avionics upgrade for Ukrainian helicopters, work on Kuwaiti patrol boats and Colombian frigates.

Reforms aimed at streamlining the administrative process helped the rise in exports, and some 3 percent of the exports came directly from small companies.

France, in the closing days of its European Union presidency last year, succeeded in transforming a code of conduct into a legally binding common position on arms sales. The eight criteria governing weapon exports included consideration of respect for international treaties, record of human rights in the prospective purchasing nation, its internal security situation, regional stability and the country's economic and technological capacity.

The annual report is intended to provide transparency on France's foreign arms sales.

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