

IAF OFFICERS CALLED TO SC

Rafale jet fits the bill of what India needs: Top IAF officer

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NEWDELHI: As part of a four-hour-long Supreme Court hearing in the Rafale case, Air Vice Marshal J Chalapathi, who has been associated with Rafale aircraft procurement decision, defended the purchase, saying India needed a fourth generation plus aircraft and Rafale fitted the bill.

Chalapathi, along with Air Marshal VR Chaudhari, deputy chief of the air staff, and Air Marshal Anil Khosla, vice chief of air staff, presented themselves in the top court to brief a three-judge bench led by chief justice of India (CJI) Ranjan Gogoi on the procurements of 36 Rafale fighter jets from France.

The CJI had sought the assistance of the Indian Air Force in the case, saying, "We are dealing with the requirements of the air force. We need to speak to someone from the force."

Before breaking for lunch, the bench asked attorney general KK Venugopal if any air force officer was present in the court. "Do you have somebody from the air force here? We want to meet someone from the air force and not from the ministry," CJI Gogoi said when Venugopal pointed to a senior bureaucrat from the ministry of defence who was present in court.

The attorney general then assured the court that an IAF officer would be summoned to assist



■ The SC sought the assistance of IAF officers in Rafale case

the court in the case.

When the bench reassembled, it noticed the officers in uniform present in the court.

Venugopal called upon AVM Chalapathi to answer the judges. "He has been associated with the Rafale aircraft procurement decision and would help the court on the purchase," Venugopal told the bench.

To a query by the bench, Chalapathi said the latest edition of fighter jets in the Indian Air Force has been the Sukhoi 30. "It continues to be manufactured in Nashik," the officer said.

Apart from the Sukhoi 30, the Light Combat Aircraft (LCA) is being manufactured in Bangalore, the officer submitted.

"So, currently two combat aircraft are being manufactured. How do you describe the aircraft? To which generation do they belong," the CJI enquired. "As a fighter pilot, how would you describe it?"

"I would rate it as 3.5-4 generation aircraft," the officer responded. "The LCA is an excellent aircraft and falls in the 3.5

generation, though our requirement is a fourth to fifth generation aircraft," Chalapathi said. He told the CJI that the world over, fifth-generation technology was the niche.

Chalapathi said the Mirage, which is a 3.5 generation aircraft, was last inducted in 1985. The CJI asked the officer, "so, virtually no induction has taken place between 1985 and 2018?"

To the query, the officer answered in the affirmative.

At the end of the hearing, petitioner and advocate Prashant Bhushan clarified that he and his co-petitioners had not contested the suitability of the fighter planes for induction.

"Nobody is questioning the choice of the aircraft," Bhushan submitted, contending that the objection was to the procedure followed in procuring the aircraft.

"AVM J Chalapathi's remark on fighter induction in 1985 is in reference to the Mirage-2000 fighters only," said a senior IAF officer.

At a press conference, the Congress said the Rafale deal was not a "government-to-government" agreement. Congress leader Kapil Sibal said the Indian government should not have signed a contract with Dassault Aviation after it turned "non-compliant" by not giving assurances on the aircraft's quality and on man-hours required for manufacturing the jets.