

IAF effort to support HAL hit capabilities: Dhanoa

CRITICAL Air chief says additional production of Su-30 is delayed by over two years

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NEWDELHI: The Indian Air Force's (IAF) efforts to support the state-owned aircraft maker Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd (HAL) has affected its fighting capabilities, Chief of Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal BS Dhanoa said in Delhi on Friday.

IAF has only cooperated with HAL, "as a service; we have made concessions for HAL, but will the enemy make any concession for us when we face them in battle?" he questioned.

The air chief was delivering the 10th Jumbo' Majumdar International Conference at the Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS) in New Delhi and was responding to criticism about the IAF's alleged dislike for the indigenous fighter made by HAL, Light Combat Aircraft, Tejas.

"IAF has not shifted any goal posts as alleged," Air Chief Marshal Dhanoa said countering allegations that developments of the Tejas fighter suffered because the IAF changed specifications and requirements frequently.

On the contrary, the IAF chief said, "We have maintained the Air Staff Quality Requirements (ASQR or specifications) of the first 20 LCA Mk-I at standards



■ Air chief marshal BS Dhanoa

issued in 1985." And even then HAL has been able to manufacture only "10 fighters", he added.

A HAL spokesperson declined comment on the air chief's comments which come at a time when the state-owned aircraft maker is in financial distress of some sort and also when it is in the middle of the controversy surrounding the government's Rafale fighter deal.

A HAL official who spoke on condition of anonymity asked: "Doesn't IAF allow concessions and modifications to foreign vendors? Concessions are also given to Defence Research Development Organisation and the Aeronautical Development Agency. Why is HAL being singled out?"

Putting HAL on the mat, Air Chief Marshal Dhanoa said upgrading of one squadron of Jaguar deep strike bombers, nearly two squadrons of Su-30MKi, India's mainstay

fighters, and one squadron of Mirage-2000, a multi-role fighter, all work being done by the state-owned firm, was far behind schedule.

"Additional production of Su-30 is delayed by over two years and LCA production commitment (has been delayed) by over six years," he added.

In addition, the air chief said in its quest for indigenisation, IAF has lost as many as 17 personnel including test pilots and engineers in air accidents.

These accidents happened when "testing and evaluation" of the indigenous platforms such as Marut fighters Kiran trainers.

The National Democratic Alliance's deal to buy 36 Rafale fighters in a government to government deal from France has become controversial.

It replaces a deal by the previous government to buy 126 aircraft of which 108 were to be assembled in India by HAL.

The government has said the old deal wasn't viable.

The opposition Congress and others have claimed the new deal is costlier than the old one, that due process wasn't followed, and that the new deal was done to benefit Reliance Defence, an offset partner of Rafale maker Dassault.

Reliance, Dassault and the government have denied this.

The government has also said the prices are not comparable because the new deal also includes India-specific customisation and weapons.

The Supreme Court recently said it believes due process was followed in the deal and that it wouldn't go into the pricing of the deal, effectively giving the government a clean chit.

However, the controversy continues to rage on. In the course of this, Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd's ability to manufacture aircraft has also been called into question.

The IAF chief also said that the force can't cut down either expenditure or its workforce anymore.

"The entire salary bill of the IAF is ₹16,621 crores, while our capital expenditure is ₹35,407 crores. We need ₹8870 crores for fuel and maintenance."

He added: "There is no way we can cut our manpower to pay for our capital acquisitions".

Explaining the high cost of operations, the IAF chief explained: "Manning of a Su-30 squadron is nearly twice that of a MiG-21 squadron and the cost of per hour operation is 3.5 times higher."