

30 yrs after Bofors, Army gets big guns

Receives Advanced 155mm Howitzers

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: The big guns are finally booming in India again. The Army on Friday officially inducted its first advanced 155mm howitzers for high-volume fire-power after a gap of three decades, finally exorcising the Bofors ghost that stymied all its artillery modernisation plans since the late-1980s.

Three M-777 ultra-light howitzers from the US and ten K-9 Vajra tracked self-propelled guns from South Korea were symbolically handed over to the Army, after extensive testing and “compilation of firing tables” spread over some months, at the Deolali field firing ranges in Maharashtra on Friday.

The ceremony, attended by defence minister Nirmla Sitharaman, her junior minister Dr Subhash Bhamre and Army chief General Bipin Rawat among others, also witnessed the induction of 6x6 field artillery tractors developed by Ashok Leyland to replace the ageing fleet of gun-towing vehicles.

“These state-of-the-art gun systems are being inducted almost 30 years after the Bofors guns were inducted. The Army will get many more such systems over the next few years,” said Sitharaman. While the M-777 howitzers have a strike range of 30-km, the K-9 guns can target enemy positions 28-38 km away.

India had inked the \$737 million (over Rs 5,000 crore) contract for acquisition of 145 M-777 howitzers from the US in a government-to-



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government deal after it was cleared by the Cabinet Committee on Security in November 2016, as was first reported by **TOI**.

All 145 of these air-mobile 155m/39-calibre howitzers are slated for induction by August 2021, with five guns to be delivered every month from August 2019 onwards. While the first 25 guns will be imported, the rest 120 will be assembled in India with artillery-manufacturer BAE Systems selecting Mahindra Defence as its business partner here.

The Rs 4,366 crore deal for the 100 155mm/52-calibre K-9 guns, in turn, was signed with Larsen & Toubro and its South Korean partner Hanwha Tech Win last year. Ninety of the guns will be largely manufactured in India, with some major assemblies coming from South Korea, with the first 40 slated for delivery by November 2019 and the rest 50 by November 2020.

The 13-lakh strong Army could not induct a single

155mm artillery gun since the Bofors scandal brought down the Rajiv Gandhi government, and derailed all plans for technology transfer and indigenous manufacture.

Subsequent scandals revolving around other global artillery manufacturers, like South African Denel in 2005 and Singapore Technology Kinetic's in 2009, further derailed the Army's artillery modernisation plans. Interestingly, the original Swedish Bofors company is now owned by BAE Systems.

The Army has been demanding ultra-light howitzers like the M-777s for over 15 years as part of the plan to build robust conventional deterrence against China. Weighing just over 4-tonne due to the use of titanium, the M-777 can swiftly be air-lifted by helicopters and aircraft to high-altitudes areas up to 16,000-feet in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh along the 4,057-km Line of Actual Control with China.