

WHY INDIA NEEDS HELICOPTERS?

RISE OF THE MACHINES: FROM SHUTTLE SERVICES TO DISASTER MANAGEMENT AND LAW ENFORCEMENT, HELICOPTERS ARE VERSATILE MACHINES THAT CAN HANDLE MOST OPERATIONS

By Sanjay Malhotra

Helicopters' ability to land almost anywhere, hover and turn on a single spot and operate from all types of terrain have also made them popular with military, police forces, emergency medical services, news gathering, sightseeing, and in disaster relief operations.

From the time the first civil helicopter took to the skies in India in November 1953 up to 1986, commercial employment of helicopters was limited to small companies such as Cambata Aviation and Bharat Air. These were involved in communications and crop spraying. Today there are approximately 284 civil registered helicopters in the country, with about 70 commercial operators and 36 maintenance organisations. This number is woefully inadequate when compared to the number of civil helicopters seen worldwide. Helicopters in India account for less than 1% of the global civil helicopters (35,000). In comparison, in Brazil, a developing country like ours, the city of Sao Paulo (similar to Mumbai and Delhi) itself has about 750 helicopters. The US a leader in the civil helicopter market has about 14,000 helicopters, while our neighbour China is reported to have about 1,200 helicopters.

Global statistics on civil helicopter operations indicate that 40% of the fleet is used for corporate aviation, 29% for emergency medical services and law enforcement, 16% in the energy sector for onshore/offshore operations, and the remaining for operations in heli-tourism, adventure sports and aerial surveys.

Energy sector/offshore operations: In India, there are about 40 helicopters employed in the offshore sector. These



account for over 75% of the total flying hours logged by the civil helicopter fleet in the country. As oil exploration moves further offshore, the demand for modern helicopters with better range and advanced safety features would increase.

Heli-tourism: Operators such as Himalayan Aviation, Global Vectra and PHHL are already providing heli-tourism packages in various parts of the country. Journeys to Badrinath, Kedarnath, Vaishno Devi and Amarnath, which were difficult and time consuming earlier, have now been made easier through heli-pilgrimages. There are various other centres where such heli-pilgrimages can be promoted.

Shuttle services: The requirement for helicopters for shuttle services is also growing, especially in the Northeast. Helicopters also providing inter-island transportation for Andaman & Nicobar Islands and Lakshadweep. With a number of interna-

tional airports located far away from the centre in cities like Bangalore, Hyderabad, Chennai and Shimla, heli-shuttle requirements are bound to see a rapid increase.

Helicopter Emergency Medical Services

HELICOPTERS IN INDIA ACCOUNT FOR LESS THAN 1% OF THE GLOBAL CIVIL HELICOPTERS

(HEMS): A helicopter equipped with emergency medical equipment along with a qualified medic can play a crucial role in saving lives. The HEMS concept needs to be implemented at the earliest; the lead needs to be taken by the government, which can offer subsidies to reduce the cost of operations.

Disaster management: The National

Disaster Response Force (NDRF) under the National Disaster Management Agency (NDMA) has been constituted to provide immediate relief/rescue. If the NDRF wants to fly their teams to remote areas, it must get permission from the home ministry and the defence ministry to use helicopters. It may be worth considering equipping the NDMA with adequate numbers of suitable helicopters to be deployed with NDRF.

Fire-fighting: Should a fire occur in a high-rise, it could be disastrous. Fire-fighters cannot reach the upper stories from the exterior. But helicopters are very effective; they can deliver large volumes of water with pin-point accuracy and have a quick turn-around time. The Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor plans to create smart cities along a designated route. An infrastructure for aerial fire-fighting method that uses helicopters should be created in these smart cities.

Law enforcement: In India the concept of aerial law enforcement by the police and allied agencies is in a nascent stage. The use of civil registered helicopters being used in anti Naxal operations in the red corridor is a recent step in this direction. However, these measures need to be streamlined.

Operational & fiscal bottlenecks: The rising costs of aviation turbine fuel (ATF), customs duty for import of helicopters/spares, application of fixed-wing air traffic rules to helicopters and the generally low rates seen across the industry as compared to other countries, have stymied the growth of the civil helicopter industry. We have to look at a network of heliports and roof top helipads if the full potential of civil helicopter operations in India is to be realised.

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