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More UAVs watching Bastar 24x7 ahead of polls

Rakhi Chakrabarty, TNN | Nov 2, 2013, 02.08 AM IST



CRPF, the nodal agency overseeing deployment of security forces for the assembly elections, has increased the number of UAVs in the Maoist zone for round-the-clock surveillance.

NEW DELHI: Boots on the ground and eye in the sky — the home ministry is using both in tandem to secure **assembly elections** in south Chhattisgarh's **Bastar** region, a Maoist stronghold. The CRPF, nodal agency overseeing deployment of security forces for the upcoming assembly elections in five states, has increased the number of **unarmed aerial vehicles** (UAVs) in the Maoist zone for round-the-clock surveillance. UAVs have been withdrawn from Maoist zones in Maharashtra's Gadchiroli, Jharkhand and Odisha and mounted above Bastar.

About half a dozen UAV Netra, owned by the CRPF, are conducting recon and gathering real-time intelligence across about 40,000 sq km of Bastar region that votes on November 11. These **indigenous** UAVs can send real-time video of ground movement within a 5-km radius. Netra can identify human activity about 500 m away.

Besides, the MHA has asked the NTRO, country's elite intelligence agency, to fly UAV Heron whose range — about 400 km — is much more than the UAV Netra. The Israeli Heron is operated from airbase at Begumpet in Hyderabad. It was supposed to start operating from October 1. However, its launch was delayed by about a month due to various reasons, including weather.

The UAVs will aid planning of operations and deployment of more than 50,000 security forces inducted in Bastar's Maoist heartland for the polls, said a senior officer.

The poll boycott call by the Maoist and history of violence in Bastar makes the November 11 election prone to high security risk.

In early October, Ramanna, Dandakaranya Special Zonal Committee secretary of the Maoists, said, "When the government uses force and violent measures to defy our poll boycott call, then we will definitely resist such repression."

The message is loud and clear. "We are pulling all stops to ensure a safe election in Bastar," said a CRPF officer.

The UAVs can play a crucial role in surveillance and intelligence gathering in the region where real-time human intelligence is hard to come by. Flow of technical intelligence is meager as large swathes are inaccessible and not covered by mobile phone network, for instance.

Grabs sent by the UAVs help the security forces on the ground to monitor Maoist movement and plan precision strike operations in Bastar and also along Chhattisgarh's border with Andhra Pradesh, Odisha and Jharkhand.

However, the UAVs have not had a spotless record over Chhattisgarh's hostile terrain. The UAV Heron had failed to spot the movement of about 500 Maoist cadres in Bastar's Darbha Ghati. These Maoists attacked a convoy of Congress leaders almost wiping out the party's top leadership in **Chhattisgarh** in May.

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