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UAVs keep watch as Modi flags off Jagannath rath yatra

Deployed for the first time to monitor a religious procession, two Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) hovered over the skies of Ahmedabad today as Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi performed rituals amid tight security to flag off the traditional Jagannath rath yatra.

The 136th edition of the rath yatra was flagged off from a 400-year-old Jagannath temple in Jamalpur area here.

Called the Netra or "eye", the UAVs would conduct aerial patrolling, monitor the procession and click digital photographs with the aim of ensuring fool-proof security, officials said. The 'eye in the sky' project of the Gujarat police is expected to give it a bird's eye view for enhanced surveillance.

As per tradition, elephants had a first glimpse of Lord Jagannath and led the procession that passed through different parts of Ahmedabad including some sensitive areas of the city to cover a distance of 14 kms.

Modi, who has been anointed as the chief of BJP's Election Campaign Committee for the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, performed the 'Pahind Vidhi' (symbolic cleaning of the path for chariot of Lord Jagannath) after which the procession of Lord Jagannath, Lord Baldev and their sister Subhadra began.

The BJP strongman prayed for a good monsoon for farmers and for "peace, brotherhood and growth" in the country after pulling out the chariot of Lord Jagannath from the temple.

Saying he was fortunate to repeatedly get a chance to bow at the feet of the deity to seek his blessings, Modi said,

"All of us should pray to Lord Jagannath that this nation should move ahead towards peace, sadhbhavna (goodwill), unity, delight and prosperity."

"The monsoon season has begun and with the blessings of Lord Jagannath, I pray that the entire country receives a good rainfall so that our farmers, villages and the

poor can benefit," he added.

According to a temple trustee, Modi performed the traditional 'Pahind Vidhi' ceremony for a record 12th time.

In addition to the UAVs, 20 Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) cameras have been installed at various places.

Fourteen paramilitary companies--BSF (6), RAF (4), Central Reserve Police Force (2) and Central Industrial Security Force (2)--were deployed in Ahmedabad to prevent any untoward incidents, officials said.

Eight teams of Bomb Detection and Disposal Squad (BDDS) were also part of the security arrangements.