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Idiots eye in search for life

- Unmanned vehicle debuts in disaster relief

NISHIT DHOLABHAI



Dehradun, June 23: Amardeep Singh is one of the “four idiots” helping rescuers in Uttarakhand — one of the unseen faces behind Aamir Khan’s flying machine in *3 Idiots*.

A strapping young IITian (graduated in 2008), Amardeep is the chief marketing officer of IdeaForge Technology Private Limited that conceptualised and manufactured India’s first indigenously developed remotely piloted or unmanned aerial vehicle fitted with a camera, Netra. The machine featured in *3 Idiots*.

On Saturday, Singh became part of a rescue team in Uttarakhand to try the machine, christened Netra (Sanskrit for eye), in disaster relief for the first time.

An ITBP jawan carries a child on his back at Govindghat in Uttarakhand. (PTI)

“We wanted to see how it works in a situation like this and the IG, NDRF (National Disaster Response Force), asked us ‘why don’t you join the team’,” says Singh, as his young team of a former army captain, a helicopter pilot and an engineer busied themselves for the task at hand.

Ask them anything about numbers sold and pricing and the reply is curt. “It is a matter of security,” says Singh.

The Netra, a square one-foot-by-one-foot flying camera, was seen in *3 Idiots* as the successful effort of a failed genius. Singh said he and his two colleagues were operating the laptop while Aamir showed the trick with a remote control device flying the UAV and found a dead friend in the college hostel.

In Gaurikund, close to Kedarnath, however, Netra is tasked to find the living instead in what the security forces are now calling “the woods of the dead”. Over 120 corpses are said to be littered here across a kilometre and a half.

A sign of life will be indicated by a thermal signature on a laptop that could be as far as 2.5km from the flying Netra. The little flying object has been useful in surveillance in Naxalite-affected areas of central India.

Rains could spoil this, Singh concedes, but insists its effectiveness is tested.

“I have been to the interiors in Bijapur, in Jharkhand and elsewhere and we will be present at any place where the country demands,” said Singh as his colleagues,

Captain Stephen Anand and chopper pilot Pranav Matta try their hand at a collapsible four-man tent.

At the Jolly Grant Airport near Dehradun, an equally young battery of Indian Air Force chopper pilots are curious what is contained in the neatly packed grey waterproof scrabble-sized packs.

“They are UAVs,” answers engineer Ashwin Barretto and impresses the solidly confident IAF aircrew from a squadron called Mavericks.

One of the Mi-17 pilots laughed at the Netra’s prowess, equivalent, according to him, of simply lifting the head and gaining sight of a target 2km away. Netra’s range is 2.5km at a height of about 200 metres into areas inaccessible to jawans. The UAV aims to find out if anyone is alive in this unseen terrain near Kedarnath.

Singh said he is the junior-most among IdeaForge start-uppers Ankit Mehta, Rahul



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Singh, and Vipul Joshi. Coming from the same fields of electronics and robotics at IIT Bombay, the foursome thought of coming up with Netra.

"We had thought of naming it something that would be like Maggie and noodles," says Singh, fiddling with a phone apparently wired to a camera in his pocket.

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