

Title:Regarding increase in the aircraft accidents in the Indian Air Force.

SHRI RAJESH PILOT (DAUSA): Mr. Speaker, Sir, I wanted this subject to be discussed in detail but you are kind enough to allow me so that I can raise it and the hon. Defence Minister can reply this query. There has been a serious concern of all of us and the nation over the increase in the aircraft accidents in the Indian Air Force, especially the MiG aircraft. We have lost the best pilots. We have lost nearly 18 aircraft in this year, and out of 18, I think, if I am not mistaken, 15 are the MiG aircraft. I recollect this aircraft was flying with the man and the machine. The man has to be fit and the machine has to be fit. I am told these aircraft machines are of 35 to 36 years old. They are 35 years old. They have crossed 20 squadrons of MiG squadron. They have crossed their designed limit and they are on extension. The pilots are aware of it.

I had been a pilot. When I sit on the aircraft, my morale will be there but I also know that the machine is not that fit which I need. So, this is a concern which the Government must take care of it. I am told that they are not getting spare parts even for all the flying machines and also MiG aircraft. I do not know the reason. I do not know whether it is because of lacunae in the agreement or financial problems.

I am also told that the purchase of Advance Jet Trainer has been pending. Well, I also share this because during our Government's time also, it was discussed. It is one thing. There is a very, very vast change of reactions and actions of a pilot when flying from the Kiran which is a Jet Trainer and straightaway going to MiG. The hon. Defence Minister would appreciate this. I have flown Kiran. I have sat in the MiG aircraft. Kiran and MiG are no comparison. Advance Jet Trainer has been in demand. If I recollect when La Fontain was the Air Chief Marshal in 1982-83, he recommended it. It was agreed by the Government and till now, the Advance Jet Trainer has not been bought. That itself is a first thing. I think that this country is only doing this type of a sudden change from Kiran to the MiG and Jaguar. The brave pilots of our Air Force are just coping with it.

The second point is that in 1995 when we were in the Government, we started a self-reliance initiative. We were 30 per cent self-reliance on these things. We had promised that we should reach 70 per cent self-reliance. I would like to know from the hon. Minister the progress on self-reliance. Have you really gone from 30 to 40? Or are we going on below 30 per cent on self-reliance? These are the needs of the Defence which are really very important.

The last point is about the man who sits in the cockpit. My information is that there is already a 10 per cent shortage in the Air Force of pilots and other officers at the lower level. Is Government aware of this shortage? Why is this shortage? Why more pilots are not coming? Why officers are not coming to the Defence Services? Just now my colleague, Shri Priya Ranjan Dasmunsi has mentioned that defence and security of the nation is the most important aspect.

The whole Parliament discussed the Fifth Pay Commission and we all passed it. I am told, Sir, that flying pay for the pilots has not been implemented yet. There was some controversy. Shri Mulayam Singh Yadav is not here. He was the Defence Minister at that time. A Committee was appointed with the Defence Secretary heading that Committee. That Committee had also given the report two years back. Still, the flying pay to the pilot has not been decided.

Now, imagine the morale of that man who is sitting on that cockpit. What does he must be feeling? He is not having a machine to fly. He is not having a fit machine; and imagine his morale. He knows very well that his welfare should be looked after by the Government. I am not saying that you compare with the civil pilot. Even if a civil pilot gets invalid in flying accidents, his licence is insured for a few lakhs but in Air Force, the pilot gets invalid. I do not know whether he gets anything, except that his Branch is changed and he continues in this.

I brought this information just to bring to the attention of the Government and to show their concern so that Government reacts both on the machine and the man so that our flying pilots remain fit to defend the nation. I think the Minister might react.

"> THE MINISTER OF DEFENCE (SHRI GEORGE FERNANDES): Sir, the hon. Member has raised a very important issue. Several times this has figured in the House either through Questions or through such interventions.

"> I will reply point by point rather than make a statement. In so far as the strength of the pilots and the shortage are concerned, we are, at the moment, holding 95.9 per cent of the sanctioned strength in the Indian Air Force. In so far as the Combat Squadrons are concerned, we are holding 100 per cent. So, there is absolutely no shortage of pilots.

"> In so far as the Combat Squadrons are concerned, we are very well-equipped. I want the House to rest assured that both in terms of recruitment and in terms of positioning them, there has not been any kind of tardiness or any kind of shortfall. There is, however, an effort now to see that we get better talent. That is where, out of the 60 pilots who are brought in for training, a large number get into the Transport Squadron and the Helicopters. We select the best available talent for the fighter pilots.

"> In so far as these accidents are concerned, it is true that there have been a large number of accidents. These accidents have been on even when the MiGs were less than 20 years old, perhaps, even when they were 10 years old. In fact, in the decade of the sixties, the number of accidents averaged 40 a year. In the subsequent two decades, that is in seventies and eighties they averaged 30 a year. In this decade, which is now coming to a close, the average has been 22. So, there has been ... (Interruptions)

">SHRI RAJESH PILOT : You please explain in comparison to the flying hour task. Your task force has also reduced compared from 1960 to 1999. The flying task of the Squadrons was much larger in Sixties.

">SHRI GEORGE FERNANDES: Well, I think we have a very large Air Force today than we have in Sixties.

">SHRI RAJESH PILOT : The flying task has reduced.

">SHRI GEORGE FERNANDES: It is including the flying task. Over the years, there has been an improvement for a variety of

reasons. After all, in the Sixties it was a very young Air Force, learning, training, making mistakes. In the seventies it improved. In the Eighties it improved further and now in the nineties it has acquired a capability which you saw demonstrated. You have been a pilot and you have seen action and you know how ... (Interruptions)

">SHRI VILAS MUTTEMWAR (NAGPUR): He is Rajesh Pilot. ... (Interruptions)

">SHRI GEORGE FERNANDES : Yes, Shri Rajesh Pilot takes his surname from that. ... (Interruptions)

">MR. SPEAKER: I hope he is a political pilot.

"> ... (Interruptions)

">SHRI GEORGE FERNANDES : Therefore, it is not the flying task. It is much more today than it was earlier. It is the improvement in the quality of the man behind the machine which is responsible for reducing these accidents.

"> Now, you made the point that invariably it is the MiGs that crashed or it is the large number of MiGs that crashed. You said about 15 out of 18 crashes were MiGs. Well, almost 80 per cent of our Air Force is MiGs. From three categories of MiG-21 to the MiG-29, 80 per cent of the Force is MiGs. Invariably it is these aircraft which see most action whether it is in training or in other areas and for training purposes. The hon. Member himself knows the real problem of not having an Advanced Jet Trainer so far.

"> Advanced Jet Trainer was the subject of a long investigation by the Standing Committee on Defence. The Standing Committee considered this question over a period of almost four years and, finally, gave its report at the beginning of this year. Now, Sir, the proposal for an Advanced Jet Trainer was first mooted in 1982, and the Air Force got into action immediately to identify what they thought was the best available in the market -- invariably, one had to import this. The idea was to buy them overseas because we do not produce those things here. But from 1982 till date, we have not been able to procure those Advanced Jet Trainers. Last year, when this matter came up before me, we started working on this at a greater speed than had happened in the earlier phase for whatever reasons. Money must have been one of the considerations, I presume. But for whatever reasons, this matter had not been attended with the required urgency for almost ten or twelve years. We have now reached a point where those two aircraft that had been short listed earlier have been again short listed; not only that, we have set up a Committee, and I happen to be the Chairman of that Committee so that we can take an early decision on this. So, the aircraft have been identified; the choice has to be made. There are certain norms that the Air Force has worked out, and on the basis of those norms, the Air Force is now evaluating which of the two would be a better option. I am sure, the hon. Member and those who are aware of this branch of our defence requirements know that both of them are supposed to be more or less on par in so far as their capabilities are concerned. But there are other factors which are also to be taken into consideration. The Air Force is doing it in very close collaboration with the Ministry of Defence. As I said, we have a Committee which is headed by the Defence Minister himself, and a decision on acquiring new AJTs will be taken very soon. Whatever difficulties have been experienced over these many years, which has quite rightly agitated, Sir, my dear friend and the hon. Member, Rajesh Pilot, I am sure, we will be able to overcome them without much delay.

"> One of the points that he raised was about self-reliance, and whether we are moving forward or stationary. Well, we are moving forward. There is a lot of indigenisation which the Air Force Workshops themselves are engaged in, HAL is engaged in, and even there are certain areas where the private sector is also engaged in producing the spare-parts that we have been importing over a period of time. I am unable to be specific about the percentage, that is, to what point we have reached from the 30 per cent, but I can assure the House that we are progressing in this region.

"> Sir, there is this problem of pay or the implementation of the Pay Commission's recommendations and taking care of the anomalies that emerged while the Pay Commission's recommendations were sought to be implemented.

"> Sir, A Committee was set up under the Defence Secretary. That Committee gave its Report in proper time. That Report then went to a Group which included the three Chiefs -- the Chiefs of the three Services. After they vetted that Report, that Report went before the Cabinet and a decision has been taken on some aspects of the recommendations. There are two aspects of those recommendations which are still pending. There is a Group of Ministers that is seized with it at the moment. We shall have a settlement of this matter in the next few weeks.

">SHRI PRIYA RANJAN DASMUNSI : What about the Kargil Report?

">SHRI GEORGE FERNANDES: Sir, this matter was raised by the hon. Member last week during the Question Hour. I had said then that there has been no receipt of that Report. The Report has not been received. When the Report is received, then the Government will be able to consider it and then react ... (Interruptions)

">MR. SPEAKER: The hon. Minister has given an elaborate reply.

"> Now, Shri Ashok Pradhan.

">SHRI P.C. THOMAS (MUVATTUPUZHA): Sir, I want to raise another issue.

">MR. SPEAKER: I will call your name.

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