

IAF copter pilot killed in air show rehearsal

In the run-up to the upcoming international air show next week, the Indian Air Force (IAF) suffered a setback Friday when one of its choppers crashed, killing its co-pilot and injuring the pilot commanding it during an aerobatic rehearsal near here.

An IAF spokesman said that co-pilot Squadron Leader Priye Sharma succumbed to severe injuries at the air force command hospital in the city, while lead pilot Wing Commander V. Jetley is still in the hospital under observation for head injuries.

The tragic incident took place at Yelahanka base, about 20km from here, around 10 am, when an Advanced Light Helicopter (ALH), constituting the Sarang team, crashed while on an exercise over the western part of the runway with the other three in a formation.

'An inquiry has been ordered. It is too early to say whether the copter crashed due to technical fault or human error. Our officials rushed to the mishap spot to rescue the injured pilots and inspect the wreckage of the copter,' the spokesman said.

According to eye witnesses in the vicinity, the incident occurred when the ill-fated copter veered off its course while performing a 'scissors' exercise, which involves two aircraft crossing over each other at a close distance from the opposite direction.

'It happened a bit suddenly. It appeared the pilot was trying to avert a collision narrowly while crossing the other copter and crashed after losing control or balance,' a contract employee, engaged in some work related with the air show, said.

The Sarang team, which participates in major air shows held in India and overseas, showcases the prowess of Dhruv, designed, developed and manufactured by the state-owned Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd (HAL).

HAL's chief test pilot for Dhruv, Wing Commander R. Upadhyaya, said the Sarang team would participate in the flying display at the five-day air show Feb 7-11.

'The show must go on. The IAF has a back-up team. Dhruv is a copter pilot's dream in performance and application. Only an inquiry can reveal what would have led to the crash. There is no reason to withdraw Sarang from the aerobatic display at the aero event,' Uphadhyaya said.

The IAF and ministry of defence officials, however, declined to confirm whether there would be any change in the flying display programme on the inaugural day (Feb 7) due to the Dhruv crash.

HAL officials were also not forthcoming on the incident, saying the IAF should be able to come out with the details as it occurred in its premises.

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