

Navy to lease two new MQ-9B Sea Guardian unmanned aircraft from US firm

Amrita Nayak Dutta
New Delhi, August 17

THE MINISTRY of Defence on Monday inked a Rs 1,943-crore contract with American defence major General Atomics Aeronautical to lease two MQ-9B Sea Guardian High-Altitude Long-Endurance (HALE) Remotely Piloted Aircraft Systems (RPAS) for the Indian Navy for 30 months.

In a statement, the Defence ministry said the contract was signed in the presence of A Anbarasu, Additional Secretary and Director General (Acquisition), Department of Defence. It said the MQ-9B Sea Guardian HALE RPAS, equipped with advanced systems, state-of-the-art sensors and sophisticated payloads, will significantly enhance the Indian Navy's Maritime Domain Awareness capabilities.

"The systems will provide persistent intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance coverage over vast areas of the maritime domain, strengthening India's ability to monitor and respond to developments across the Indian Ocean Region," it added.

In December last year, the Ministry of Defence approved the leasing of HALE RPAS for the Navy. Currently, the Navy operates two MQ9As on lease, which were procured in 2020 in the thick of border tensions between India and China for a period of one year, and their

lease period was subsequently extended.

With the addition of two new high-altitude long-endurance systems, the Navy's inventory will increase to four units. This expansion will provide a greater operational coverage for the Navy in both the eastern and western regions. Until now, the limited number of just two HALE RPAS restricted simultaneous coverage of both fronts.

It is learnt that while the lease of the existing RPAS will expire after a certain period, the leases of the two new RPAS will continue until deliveries of the 31 MQ-9B HALE RPAS begin. It is further learnt that the new RPAS will have almost the same configuration as the 31 MQ-9Bs which are being procured, as against the existing HALE RPAS.

In 2024, India and the United States inked a deal of around \$3.5 billion or over Rs 28,000 crore to procure 31 MQ-9B HALE RPAS for the Indian armed forces. Apart from ISR roles, they can also carry out precision strikes on strategic targets in mountains and the maritime domain during long-endurance missions.

A global MRO facility will be set up in India under contract with General Atomics to assemble some of the MQ-9Bs in India to support India's long-term goals to boost indigenous defence capabilities. A certain percentage of the components for the drones will be sourced indigenously.

Over 4,000 cases pending against MPs, MLAs: Amicus curiae to SC

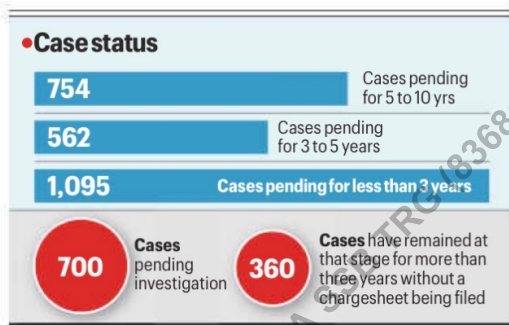
Vineet Bhalla

New Delhi, August 17

A TOTAL of 4,192 cases against sitting and former MPs and MLAs are pending trial across the country with 519 cases pending for more than a decade, according to a report submitted before the Supreme Court by Senior Advocate Vijay Hansaria, appointed amicus curiae in a PIL seeking expeditious disposal of criminal cases against MPs and MLAs.

Another 700 cases are pending investigation while 360 have remained at that stage for more than three years without a chargesheet being filed.

The figures form part of Hansaria's 22nd Amicus report. It notes that the 4,192 figure is based on information received from High Courts and their websites; the Allahabad High Court did not submit a report and its figure of 1,171 cases is from its website as of Febru-



ary 2024. The High Court websites, in total, show 4,442 pending cases.

The report states that Chief Ministers of 14 of 28 states have criminal cases against them pending trials. Telangana CMA Revanth Reddy faces the highest number of cases at 89, followed by West Bengal CM Suvenudhikari (29), Karnataka CM D K Shivakumar, Andhra Pradesh CM N Chandrababu Naidu (both 19) and Kerala CM V D Satheesan (18).

Of the 4,192 cases, 754 have been pending for 5 to 10 years, 562 for 3 to 5 years, and 1,095 for less than 3 years, it states. Among the states/High Courts with the highest reported pendency are Uttar Pradesh (1,171), Kerala (543), Bihar (373), Maharashtra (364) and Odisha (330). The cut-off dates for these figures vary. The report says the number of cases pending trial has fluctuated but remained above 4,000 since 2018 — rising from 4,075 in De-

cember 2018 to 5,140 in November 2022 before settling at 4,192 in July 2026.

In 2017, the Supreme Court ordered the setting up of 12 special courts in 10 states, UTs for speedy trials in criminal cases involving legislators. In December 2018, it directed that one designated Sessions Court and one designated Magisterial Court be identified in every district to try cases on priority.

In November 2023, the SC directed the Chief Justices of all HCs to register suo motu cases to monitor the early disposal of such cases and empowered special benches to issue directions for expeditious trials.

The matter was referred to a three-judge Bench in February 2025 after the previous amicus report highlighted the absence of effective monitoring by most HCs. It has been listed for hearing before the three-judge Bench on August 18.

Hansaria said that despite top court's directions, the pendency had remained at roughly

the same level and attributed the delay to designated courts being burdened with regular judicial work, repeated adjournments, non-appearance of accused persons, delays in securing witnesses and inadequate monitoring by High Courts.

The amicus recommended that designated courts exclusively conduct trials involving lawmakers until their backlog is cleared; that cases pending for more than 3 years be heard day-to-day; and that courts issue NBWs where an accused lawmaker fails to appear on two consecutive dates. The report also proposes a nodal prosecution officer for securing witnesses and requiring real-time uploading of case data and order sheets on HC websites.

He has also sought that trials be completed within one year of framing of charges, monthly monitoring by HCs of cases pending for more than 3 years and "micro-monitoring" of individual delayed cases.

After January launch vehicle debacle, GISAT-1A take-off in September to end ISRO's seven-month operational hiatus

Anonna Dutt

New Delhi, August 17

AFTER A SEVEN-MONTH hiatus, the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) is set to resume its launch services, with the earth observation satellite GISAT-1A set to be launched in the first week of September.

This is one of two satellites — the other being NVS-03 — that has remained parked at Sriharikota spaceport for months as launches were put on hold following a series of setbacks, said officials in the know.

Indeed, three of the six missions that ISRO undertook in 2025 and 2026 saw the satellites not reaching the intended orbits due to anomalies in the launch vehicle or spacecraft engine.

GISAT-1A or Geo Imaging Satellite — also referred to as EOS-05 under the new nomenclature — is a replacement satellite for the 2021-launched GISAT-1 (or EOS-03), which missed the orbit after the final propulsive segment of the rocket failed to ignite.

The new satellite, GISAT-1A, which boasts a 10-year mission life, is designed to image large areas of interest at frequent intervals for the purposes of monitoring natural disasters or keeping a track of agriculture or forestry.

Meanwhile, NVS-03 — fuelled and ready at Sriharikota — is likely to be launched in November, officials said.

The space agency undertook just one launch this year.

On January 12, ISRO's workhorse launch vehicle, Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV), was set to place an Earth observation satellite in orbit as part of the ISRO PSLV-C62/EOS-N1 mission.

However, the mission failed reportedly due to an "anomaly" in the third stage of the rocket. The findings of the Failure Analysis Committee which probed the incident has not been made public yet.

In 2025, ISRO undertook five launches. This included one mission wherein PSLV-C61 was set to put in orbit the Earth observation satellite EOS-09.



The launch of PSLV-C62/EOS-N1 had failed in January reportedly due to an "anomaly".

Again, the mission failed because of yet another "anomaly" in the third stage.

The space agency has maintained that the two anomalies were unrelated. However, no failure analysis report has been made public for this mission either. Then, there were two launches via the Geosynchronous Satellite Launch Vehicle (GSLV).

the analysis report have not been made public.

There were also two Launch Vehicle Mark-3 (LVM3)-enabled launches — of communication satellites Bluebird-2 and CMS-03.

These launch numbers fare poorly against the 15-mission target set by the space agency in 2025-26 and 27 in FY 2026-27 as per the recent ISRO annual report. The space agency counts the launch vehicle and satellite as separate missions. But even then, the numbers fall short.

ISRO had planned to place in orbit in 2025-26 at least four Earth observation satellites, one communication satellite, one technology demonstrator, and three (launches and spacecraft missions) under Gaganyaan programme. It had also planned for at least two PSLV, GSLV and LVM3 missions each.

For 2026-27, the space agency had set an ambitious target of at least five flights of its newly developed SSLV. This would be in addition to four PSLV, three GSLV, and one LVM3 missions. Under Gaga-

nyaan programme, it had planned at least four missions (both spacecraft and launch vehicle).

After losing NSV-02, the launch of the next satellite in the series is extremely important considering India's navigation constellation can no longer provide navigation data independently.

"...Presently, the NavIC constellation has three satellites for providing PNT (Positioning, Navigation, Timing) services — IRNSS-1B, IRNSS-1I and NVS-01. To provide basic positioning service, a minimum of four operational satellites are required in orbit. Hence, the NavIC constellation cannot provide standalone positioning service, however timing service is functional," Union Minister of State for Space, Dr Jitendra Singh, said in a Parliament reply.

Singh further stated that the armed forces continue to use NavIC signals alongside data from the US's GPS, the EU's Galileo, and Russia's GLONASS as part of a multi-constellation navigation setup.

Afghanistan consulate in Delhi marks first-ever 'Taliban victory day' event

Kallol Bhattacharjee

NEW DELHI

Afghanistan has left the era of warfare and has started a journey towards stability and reconstruction under the umbrella of the Islamic system, said the diplomatic representative of the Taliban administration at an event in the Afghanistan embassy in New Delhi that, for the first time, celebrated the 2021 'victory' of the Taliban.

Presenting what he described as Taliban-ruled Afghanistan's initiatives, Mufiti Noor Ahmad Noor, Chargé d'Affaires at the Embassy of Afghanistan, said on Monday that Afghanistan's territory should not be a space of



Taliban officials Dr. Ikramuddin Kamil and Noor Ahmad Noor in New Delhi on Monday. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

'competition' and should serve as an arena of cooperation and connectivity.

"We have left the chapter of war behind and embarked on a new chapter in which Afghanistan, under

prudent and unified leadership and within the framework of the Islamic system, has been taking steps towards stability, reconstruction, economic growth, and the expansion of relations with the world on the basis of mutual respect," said Mr. Noor in a speech delivered in Pashto.

The reception was attended by diplomats from Russia, U.S., China, Qatar, Libya, Bhutan, Mongolia, Oman and the UAE.

From the Indian side, Anand Prakash, Joint Secretary in-charge of the Pakistan-Afghanistan-Iran (PAI) division of the Ministry of External Affairs, attended the event along with other members of the Ministry.

"Despite the war in the Gulf, India-Afghanistan trade remains around \$1 billion, which is a sign of stability," said a senior Indian official.

Considering the fact that the Taliban, which does not enjoy full diplomatic recognition by India, was allowed to host a celebration of its 'Victory Day' in the Indian capital for the first time, the official said, "Taliban is a reality and we have to engage with them".

The reception was held against the backdrop of continued engagements between India and the Taliban administration in Kabul that have, in the past two years, clashed with Pakistan on multiple occasions.

Soren scraps examinations as protests rock Jharkhand

On the 24th day of protests, Jharkhand CM announces cancellation of JSSC-CGL exam as well as those held by blacklisted TDPL since 2014; stir will continue seeking CBI probe, says student leader

Amit Bhelari

PATNA

Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren on Monday announced the cancellation of the Jharkhand Staff Selection Commission-Combined Graduate Level (JSSC-CGL) examination, 24 days after students and job aspirants began a protest over alleged irregularities in recruitment exams in the State.

The decision was taken during a four-hour emergency Cabinet meeting.

Mr. Soren also announced that all examinations conducted since 2014 by TSR Data Processing Private Ltd. (TDPL), a blacklisted agency, will be cancelled. He said a committee will be formed under senior IAS officer Amitabh Kaushal to suggest reforms in the conduct of



Resilient cheers: Protesters celebrating in Ranchi on Monday after the Jharkhand CM's announcement of exam cancellations. ANI

examinations in the State.

Hundreds of students who have gathered at the Jaipal Singh Munda Stadium in Ranchi demanding that the 2025 JSSC-CGL examination be cancelled celebrated the announcement. However, Ravindra Paswan, leader of the JPSC-JSSC Reform Manch, one of the groups leading the protest, said the agitation

would continue as their key demand of a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) probe into alleged irregularities had not been met.

'More to do'

"This is the first step and first victory; our protest will continue until the CBI inquiry takes place into the irregularities. The demand

for a CBI inquiry has not been accepted yet. We have won a major battle, but there is still more to be done," Mr. Paswan said.

Jharkhand Loktantrik Krantikari Morcha leader Devendra Nath Mahto, who has been on a hunger strike for the past 16 days, said, "Congratulations to all the protesting students, and I also congratulate CM Hemant Soren, who listened to our demands. The most important thing is that the investigation should be conducted meticulously and every corrupt individual involved be apprehended. The masterminds behind these gangs must be caught."

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IT Ministry okays ₹7,877-cr. worth projects under ECMS

The projects under the Electronics Component Manufacturing Scheme include several electronic parts that have not been manufactured before in India such as metalised films for capacitors

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) on Monday approved projects collectively worth ₹7,877 crore for incentives under the Electronics Component Manufacturing Scheme (ECMS).

The projects include several electronic parts that have not been manufactured before in India, including electrolyte additives, hermetic terminals (used for defence-grade sealed assemblies), metalised films for capacitors, and coils.

The ECMS has so far approved projects collectively worth ₹69,548 crore, and these will receive turnover- or capex-linked incentives upon achieving key milestones.

IT firm Wipro's lami-



IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw and Union MoS Jitin Prasada during handing over of Approvals under ECMS on Monday. ANI

nates project had a ₹1,033 crore increase in project value, which is reflected in the project total shared by the Ministry, leaving ₹6,844 crore in approvals for fresh projects.

IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said that India was “fully atmanirbhar” (autonomous) in approved projects’ planned supplies of enclosures for devices, relays (which are being exported also), anode material, and optical transceiv-

ers. Laminates are being produced at 80% of domestic demand, with connectors, lithium ion cells and transducers at 75%, 60%, and 55% domestic production respectively.

"We are yet to reach the employment target [under the scheme], but we will reach that shortly," IT Secretary S. Krishnan said in his remarks. "This is one of the fastest moving programmes of the ministry currently, with a large

number of approvals coming up every week. We have a cadence where almost every week or 10 days we have an approval meeting where we sit down and clear whatever proposals we can bring out.”

"We have 10 States of the country which are covered in the applications which are being currently approved," he added.

The tranche approved on Monday includes projects in Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Telangana. Tamil Nadu had the highest approvals in this tranche, with seven project approvals.

"We expect that these approvals will result in a total output of production of ₹82,243 crore, with an employment of close to 10,000 persons," Mr. Krishnan added.

Trump orders scaling back of joint military exercises with South Korea

Pentagon chief ordered to 'substantially reduce' the drills as it was too late to cancel them; U.S. President says military drills send 'inappropriate and hostile' signal to North Korea; also claims South Korean President refused to help with Iran war

Agence France-Presse
SEOUL

U.S. President Donald Trump said he ordered the Pentagon to scale back "inappropriate and hostile" military drills with South Korea, hours before the exercises began on Monday.

The U.S. leader cited his "good relationship" with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in his latest rebuke to long-standing alliances with global partners.

South Korean officials said the exercises had begun as planned and that they hoped the personal chemistry between Mr. Trump and Mr. Kim would bring them back to talks.

Seoul's Presidential office said it remained in "close coordination" with Washington over the exercises.



Standing ready: U.S. soldiers seen near military vehicles at Camp Humphreys in Pyeongtaek, South Korea, on Monday. AFP

The office "hopes that the friendly relationship between the leaders of the United States and North Korea will lead to meaningful dialogue".

North Korea has not responded publicly, although it has previously voiced anger at the regular joint manoeuvres that take place in the South.

The drills began as American allies in East Asia fret over North Korean displays of weapons capabilities and its growing alignment with Russia, as well as traditional backer China.

"Based on my very good relationship with Kim Jong Un, of North Korea, I am not happy with the fact

that the United States has, long ago, agreed to participate in Joint Military Exercises with South Korea," Mr. Trump wrote on his Truth Social platform.

"These exercises are not only costly, with much of these costs paid for by the United States of America (as usual!), but send a signal that is totally inappropriate and hostile, to a Country that, as long as Donald J. Trump has been President, has been unthreatening and respectful," he said.

He took direct aim at South Korea, writing: "I recently asked the President of South Korea if they would like to join us in the Denuclearisation of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and they said, 'No thanks!'"

Mr. Trump said he had ordered Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth to "substan-

tially reduce" the drills because it was too late to cancel them.

'Inane decision'

Meanwhile, Jack Reed, the top U.S. Senate Democrat on military affairs, described Mr. Trump's order as "inane", and said China and Russia were "watching how easily this President abandons America's allies".

"This is another inane, haphazard decision by President Trump and his chaotic administration," the Senate Armed Services Committee ranking member said in a statement.

The 11-day Ulchi Freedom Shield exercises are designed to prepare for a possible war with North Korea. Pyongyang, however, decries the drills as dress rehearsals for an invasion.