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Ambala, Hasimara IAF bases being readied for Rafale jets

First squadron of fighter jets to land in Ambala station; second batch to arrive in West Bengal

Press Trust of India | Ambala
Last Updated at October 8, 2019 19:33 IST



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Rafale fighter aircraft flies during the inauguration of the 11th biennial edition of AERO INDIA 2017 at Yelahanka Air base in Bengaluru (File photo: PTI)

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The Indian Air Force has initiated major infrastructure upgrade at its frontline base in Ambala for the deployment of the first squadron of the **Rafale** jets which will give India greater "potency" over Pakistan as these will be capable of carrying nuclear weapons and other missiles.

The government has already sanctioned Rs 220 crore to set up 14 shelters, hangers and maintenance facilities at the 78-year-old base for the **Rafale** jets whose delivery is scheduled to begin from September 2019, a senior IAF official said.

"We are creating infrastructure keeping in mind infrastructure requirement for the **Rafale** jets for next 40-50 years," the official said on condition of anonymity as he is not authorised to speak to media.

The Ambala base is considered one of the most strategically located bases of the IAF as the Indo-Pak border is around 220 km from it. Currently, the base has two squadrons of the Jaguar combat aircraft and one squadron of the MiG-21 Bison.

Marshal of the IAF Arjan Singh, who passed away two weeks ago, was the first commander of the Ambala base in independent India.

Several teams from French defence major Dassault Aviation, the manufacturer of Rafale, have already visited the Ambala air force base and finalised the requirement for the first squadron of combat jets.

The IAF is also carrying out infrastructure upgrade at its Hasimara base in West Bengal which will house the second squadron of the Rafale jets, the official said.

In September last year, India had signed a Euro 7.87 billion (approx Rs 59,000 crore) deal with the French government for the purchase of 36 Rafale fighter jets. Eighteen Rafale jets will be deployed in Ambala while an equal number of the new generation jet will be stationed in Hasimara.

"We are planning to put in place all required infrastructure for Rafale squadron by end of next year," said the IAF official.

The Ambala and Hasimara stations will also have simulator-based training facilities for the aircrew of Rafale jets. The IAF has already selected a batch of pilots to fly the jets and they are being given training by Dassault Aviation in France.

The Rafale squadron to be deployed in Ambala will be known as Golden Arrows which was originally based in Bhatinda and was disbanded two years ago.

The Rafale combat jets will come with various India-specific modifications including Israeli helmet-mounted displays, radar warning receivers, low band jammers, 10-hour flight data recording and infrared search and tracking systems among others.

The features that make the Rafale a strategic weapon in the hands of IAF, which is currently down to 34 squadrons as against a sanctioned strength of 44, includes its Beyond Visual Range (BVR) Meteor air-to-air missile with a range of 150 KM.

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