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India to give new wings to 3 aircraft programmes

BENGALURU: The renewed thrust for [regional connectivity](#) and the Indian Air Force's need to replace some of its [transport aircraft](#) will see India revive three aircraft programmes, all being designed in Bengaluru. These include the re-engined and modified version of the 14-seater Saras aircraft.

National Laboratories Limited (NAL), which first conceived Saras as a civil aircraft, has been pushing for [military certification](#) in the past two years, hoping to sell the aircraft to the IAF.

Saras, a light transport aircraft, was handed over to the Aircraft and Systems Testing Establishment of IAF, and NAL is hopeful of its first flight in 45 days. "The modified Saras will have a new configuration. While the design is for a 14-seater plane, it can be configured to accommodate 19," NAL director Jitendra Jadhav said. Union minister for science and technology Harsh Vardhan, who met with Jadhav, said the Centre will provide all support.

"NAL has improved a lot in the past one-and-a-half years and no project will suffer for want of funds," he said.

Jadhav said manufacturing of two limited series prototypes will need Rs 400 crore to Rs 500 crore. "The final product will be taken care of by IAF, but we'll need this money for prototypes," he said.

If the project is revived, Saras will boast of multi-role capabilities like feeder line aircraft, air ambulance, executive aircraft, troop transport, reconnaissance, aerial survey and light cargo transport.

The Saras programme had come crashing after a 2009 accident. The original design included a maximum takeoff weight of 6,100kg and maximum payload of 1,232kg.

The first prototype which completed its maiden flight on May 29, 2004, was overweight at 5,118kg compared to the 4,125kg design specifications.

70-SEATER TO BE REVIVED

Harsh Vardhan and Jadhav said the 70-seater aircraft programme -which has consistently failed to take off from the drawing board -will also be revived.

As of now, only a paper design is complete as the project was shelved three years ago."The aircraft will now be reconfigured, given that the regional transport police will require capacity building," Harsh Vardhan said.

When the project was shelved, NAL projected an estimated cost of Rs 9,000 crore.

A source told TOI that the aircraft, which will be capable of short takeoff, will be able to operate from smaller airfields and airports that the Regional Connectivity Policy is aiming to revive.

NAL-MAHINDRA PROJECT

NM5-100, the 5-seater aircraft jointly developed by NAL and Mahindra Aerospace, being tested in Australia since 201112 after it was felt that the Director General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) lacked the expertise to certify aircraft, will be brought back to India for certification.

"There have been 12 flights in Australia. Now the DGCA has improved and they have about 20 engineers in Bengaluru. We will bring the aircraft back to India," Jadhav said.