

WHEN 12 WARPLANES LOCKED ON TO THE TARGET

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Pakistan

In the early hours of Tuesday, 12 Mirage-2000 combat jets of the Indian Air Force (IAF) armed with Israeli Precision Guided Munitions (PGM) took off from their Gwalior airbase on a crucial mission, cloaked in secrecy. The multirole fighter aircraft flew over Himachal Pradesh and Kashmir before crossing into Pakistani airspace and striking the largest training camp of the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) in Balakot inside Pakistan.

“The terror launch pads along the LoC were moved deep inside after the Pulwama attack,” a senior defence official said, speaking on condition of anonymity. “The camp in Balakot, which was targeted, is JeM’s major training camp. It’s in proper Pakistan itself, close to Abbottabad infamous because of Osama bin Laden.”

Balakot is about 60 km aerial distance from the LoC, in the Mansehra district of Pakistan’s Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, and is about two hours’ drive from Abbottabad.

India’s Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale on Tuesday termed the operation a “preemptive strike” that had become absolutely necessary after credible intelligence had pointed to the JeM planning more terror attacks across various parts of the country.

“Twelve Mirage-2000 jets from Gwalior were involved in the strike and they carried SPICE 2000 and Crystal Maze Mk2, also called AGM 142 Popeye PGMs,” an IAF source confirmed.

SPICE stands for ‘Smart, Precise Impact and Cost-Effective’ a kit which converts a conventional bomb into a smart munition and is manufactured by Rafael of Israel. The ‘2000’ refers to a bomb of 2,000 pounds (about 1,000 kg).

Out of harm’s way

The PGMs enable the aircraft to release them from stand-off distances while staying away from harm’s way and the munitions glide to the target once launched. Defence sources said five 1,000 kg PGMs were dropped in the strike, which occurred at about 3:40 a.m. on Tuesday.

The IAF also deployed the Israeli Phalcon and indigenous Netra early warning aircraft to monitor the mission — to direct the aircraft as well as to keep an eye out for Pakistani F-16s that might be deployed to counter them — and a Heron long range UAV that was used for monitoring and assessment. Sukhoi Su-30MKIs fighter jets were also airborne and standing by, as a precautionary move.

To avoid preparations from leaking out, the Mirages flew directly from their home base in Gwalior at the time of the mission to the target area and back. “Everything was carried on as usual in the run up to it to maintain secrecy,” a defence official said.

The Mirages used the Israeli Litening targeting pods to mark the targets and the PGMs were launched from a safe distance.

Another source said the initial Battle Damage Assessment (BDA) was that the hit was 100% and that all aircraft had returned safely. Further details from the assessment are awaited.

The use of air power is significant as it is the first time since the 1971 war that the IAF crossed

over and struck inside Pakistani territory.

Even during the Kargil conflict, the IAF was under strict instructions to not cross the LoC.

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