

IAF show scorches Lucknow-Agra highway

The Indian Air Force put up a spectacular show on the Lucknow-Agra highway on Tuesday as 16 of its frontline aircraft conducted elaborate landing drills on a designated airstrip built on the expressway.

The landing and touchdown exercises were held on the 3-km airstrip built on the expressway near Bangarmau in Unnao, between Lucknow and Kanpur.

The IAF's fighter class aircraft, Sukhoi-30, Mirage-2000 and Jaguar enthralled the crowd with their speed and touchdown manoeuvres. The key feature of the event, however, was the debut of the advanced turbo-prop military transport vehicle, the C-130J Super Hercules, on the highway. This was also the first time that the Jaguar participated in a highway landing exercise.

The C-130J Super Hercules, which is of U.S. origin, is utilised for special operations and relief work during HADR (Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief) operations in times of humanitarian crisis. They supply relief material during calamities such as floods and earthquakes, while also being used for evacuation.

The day's exercise started with a short landing by the massive C-130, which on its landing roll loaded off Garud commandos for ground operations.

On disembarking from the C-130, the commandos took up position on either side of the airstrip to cordon it off for the fighter operations.

Two sets of three Mirages, five Sukhois and three Jaguars, then carried out touch and go manoeuvres on the expressway. The over two-hour long performance was capped by another short landing by the C-130 as it returned to extricate the Garud commandos.

Alternative airstrip

The military has said the exercise was aimed at checking feasibility of expressways being used as alternative airstrips in case of dire emergencies or non-availability of runway for any reason.

"Over the past few years, the IAF has been increasing its efforts to utilise certain straight stretches of National Highways for emergency landings. Such highway stretches are planned to be used in emergencies, if an active airport is not available for some reason. These operations increase the flexibility in the use of Air Power," a defence spokesperson said.

This is not the first time the IAF aircraft have landed on a highway. In May 2015, fighter aircraft landed on the Yamuna Expressway for the first time, followed by an elaborate 'touch-and-go' and low-pass manoeuvres of take-offs and landings by six IAF fighter planes — three Mirages and three Sukhois — last November when the expressway was inaugurated by the Akhilesh Yadav government.

Several countries like Germany, Sweden, South Korea, Taiwan, Finland, Switzerland, Poland, Singapore, Czechoslovakia and Pakistan have dedicated stretches on their highways and expressways for aircraft to land and take off in emergencies or warlike events, the military said.

"This operation has majorly boosted IAF's capability to undertake unhindered operations even during non-availability of standard runways. It has demonstrated the expert flying skills of its fighter and transport aircrew, and the capability of its ground crew in activating such expressway airstrips

on short notice,” the spokesperson said.

The IAF plans such exercises on highway stretches in other parts of India. At 302-km, the Lucknow-Agra Expressway is the longest six-lane highway in the country. The highway cuts short the distance between the state capital and the land of the Taj Mahal, while also reducing journey time to Delhi.

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