

India Launches Major Effort to Replace Aging Helicopter Fleet



The Indian Ministry of Defense has officially initiated the long-awaited process to replace the Indian Army and Indian Air Force's (IAF) aging fleet of Chetak and Cheetah helicopters. The ministry issued a Request for Information (RFI) on Friday for the procurement of roughly 200 new light helicopters, a move aimed at modernizing the armed forces' reconnaissance and surveillance capabilities.

The RFI specifies a requirement for 120 helicopters for the Army and 80 for the IAF. This procurement, classified as Reconnaissance and Surveillance Helicopters (RSH), is a crucial step towards phasing out the vintage Chetak and Cheetah choppers, which have been in service for decades. The existing fleet is comprised of single-engine aircraft whose design dates back to the 1960s, and they have been involved in a number of accidents over recent years. The RFI aims to finalize the technical specifications for the new aircraft and identify potential suppliers, including Indian firms that can partner with foreign manufacturers. This aligns with the government's push for "Atmanirbhar Bharat" (self-reliant India), emphasizing indigenous defense production.

The new helicopters are intended to perform a variety of multi-role, day-and-night operations. These duties include reconnaissance and surveillance, transporting small Quick Reaction Teams for special missions, supporting ground operations, casualty evacuation, and search and rescue efforts. The replacement program is part of a broader push to modernize the country's military hardware. In a recent report tabled in Parliament, the Ministry of Defense highlighted

that the IAF is focused on achieving self-reliance across various platforms, including fighters, transport aircraft, and helicopters.

The new fleet is expected to start phasing in by 2027. While Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) is developing an indigenous Light Utility Helicopter (LUH) as part of the overall replacement plan, its full-scale induction has faced delays due to technical issues, specifically with the autopilot system. The RFI for 200 light helicopters represents a significant step forward in ensuring the Indian armed forces can maintain their operational readiness, particularly in challenging environments like the high-altitude regions of Siachen and the deserts of Thar.