

DRDO's much-awaited ATR ready for take-off

Come Sunday, an exclusive Aeronautical Test Range (ATR) with a Defence Industrial Complex at Chellakere in Chitradurga district of Karnataka will be on the nation's radar. This multi-agency Defence complex for integrating and testing different Unmanned Air Vehicles (UAV) will cater to the Defence needs. It will be unveiled by Defence Minister Arun Jaitley on Sunday. The ATR built by Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) will have strategic testing ground for UAVs and possibly would be extended to other Defence aeronautical tests, which would include Indian pride Tejus.

The ATR built at a cost of Rs 1,300 crore in Varavoo Kaval near Challakere will have technical infrastructure on 4,090 acres and transit and residential facilities on 200 acres. It will house multiple agencies under the Defence Ministry.

The ATR is now ready and already they have flown Rustom 1 and Rustom-2 on a 2.2 kms runway in the facility. The facility, once complete, can test naval and trainer versions of the Light Combat Aircraft, Unmanned Air Vehicles Rustom 1 and 2; and the Airborne Early Warning & Control Systems meant for surveillance. The ATR can extend runway for another km to augment testing of Tejus and AEWACS.

Scientists say the complex housing the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC) and the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) in a 10,000 acre of land would lead Indian Defence Research.

A week ago, UAV Rustom 1 was tested successfully and the Rustom -2 is gearing up for a flight test on Sunday. This modern test facility is also for Unmanned Combat Air Vehicles (UCAV) project and other advanced programmes in aerospace and missile technology by the DRDO. A couple of hangars are almost ready, as also the runway, which has been designed to cater to fighter jets or large transport aircraft.

According to sources, the Indian Army would also commence work on its Commando Training Centre (CTC) in this complex.

In February, Pakistan had alleged that India had built "a secret nuclear city" at Challakere to produce atomic weapons. However, New Delhi was quick to dismiss these allegation as "baseless" and a "figment of imagination."

Several news portals of Pakistan quoted Nafees Zakaria, the spokesperson of Pakistan Foreign Affairs Ministry, stating that India had built "a secret nuclear city."

"These are completely baseless allegations. The secret city appears to be a figment of Pakistan's imagination," Vikas Swarup, spokesperson of the Ministry of External Affairs had said.

"India has always been in compliance with all its international obligations. This is a very strange statement coming from a country that does not have a separation plan and has a strong record of proliferation which is well known to the world," Swarup had said.

However, this complex faced many hurdles before its completion. Local farmers had agitated against land acquisition for the project. In 2013, work was halted by the National Green Tribunal from 21 August, 2013 to 3 September 2013 after Karnataka State Pollution Control Board (KSPCB) had withheld the 'Consent for Establishment' (CFE) application. Later, it issued the CFE after which works resumed. Karnataka Government has sanctioned around 10,000 acres for this one of its kind Defence Industrial Complex, to boost indigenous research and testing.