

DRDO's assault rifles to throw shield around Assam rhinos

By Rahul Karmakar

The indigenously developed Ghatak will be given to forest guards to combat armed poachers who killed 30 of the animals last year

An indigenous hybrid rifle, named Ghatak for 'deadly,' will protect the rhino in Assam from heavily armed poachers.

The Assam Forest Department is poised to be the first non-police or non-paramilitary force to acquire the Ghatak, a multi-calibre rifle from the Defence Research Development Organisation (DRDO). It placed orders for the weapon more than a year ago. The rifle is described as a cross between an automatic close-combat weapon such as AK-47 and a more lethal long-range firearm.

Some consignments of the rifle have been delivered to Central Paramilitary Force as well as the Assam Police. The Ghatak is yet to clear the more stringent tests of the Army, such as 18 rounds of non-stop firing, but forest officials are not worried. "Our combat situation is different from that of the Army," they say.

Dharanidhar Boro, a highly decorated green soldier who retired in 2016 after years of fighting poachers in Kaziranga National Park, is upbeat about Ghatak's induction. "I am not sure how good it is, but it will certainly be much better than the unwieldy 0.315 rifles with which we guarded the rhino's best-known home," he said from western Assam's Manas National Park, where he is now an officer on special duty.

Poachers a step ahead

On Kaziranga, a World Heritage site established in 1905, some 230 km east of Guwahati, the veteran officer says, "We did our best to save the rhinos during our time, but the poachers are always a step ahead. It is high time our guards are equipped with weapons that deter poachers." The national park houses more than 55% of the world's one-horned rhinos and boasts the highest density of Royal Bengal tigers.

Forest department records say 30 rhinos have been killed in the 430 sq. km. Kaziranga and other wildlife reserves such as Orang National Park and Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary since January 2016. Six poachers were killed during this period. Cartridges recovered from rhino kill sites revealed the poachers were using AK-56 rifles, M16 and M4 carbines.

"The killing of a couple of rhinos last year made us realise that the archaic, single-shot bolt action rifles of our guards are no match for the sophisticated automatic weapons of the poachers. A decision was taken to overhaul the arsenal of our department," Environment and Forest Minister Pramila Rani Brahma said.

"In March last year, we purchased an assortment of rifles from Ishapore Ordnance Factory in Kolkata. We received a few, but we are really looking forward to the Ghatak rifles," the State's Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, Bikash Brahma, said.

The weapons the department bought were 272 Indian Small Arms System or INSAS assault rifle, 954 self-loading rifles or SLRs, 91 Ghatak rifles, 20 pistols (9mm), and 133 pump action guns of 12-bore.

"Our men in the field are excited about Ghatak. But it will take a great deal of adjustment from the old rifles to a hybrid one," Kaziranga's Divisional Forest Officer Rohini Ballave Saikia said.

Assam's choice

Army and paramilitary forces in the militancy-hit Northeast comprising eight States do not use the Ghatak, but the Assam Police does.

On the choice of the weapon, Assam Police chief Mukesh Sahay said, "I cannot be specific about the number, but we received a small consignment a year ago. More are in the pipeline. We procure weapons based on our requirement, which primarily is counter-insurgency. We need long-range and area weapons too."

Senior police officials, however, said Ghatak tested in a field situation because militancy has ebbed over the last 15 months.

Army officials said the initiative to make the 5.56mm-7.62mm hybrid came from the Ordnance Factory Board. Of the three prototypes made by three ordnance factories, the one developed by Rifle Factory Ishapore cleared all preliminary tests. “It fell short of the Army’s requirement, though,” an officer said, declining to be named.

The Defence Ministry has tendered for multi-calibre rifles, officials said. Among those in contention are Beretta and Colt, the latter making M4 carbines. But the Ishapore factory is keen on upgrading Ghatak.

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