

**The Telegraph**

## **10 IAF choppers for rebel combat**

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**New Delhi:** The Centre will deploy a fleet of 10 Indian Air Force helicopters in its impending anti-Maoist offensive. The helicopters, which will be armed, will reinforce the offensive by 80,000 central paramilitary troops to be entrusted with the task of clearing out Naxalite strongholds across five states — Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh. The choppers will be stationed at different locations like Ranchi in Jharkhand and Raipur in Chhattisgarh.

“The helicopters will be used for dropping commandos and casualty evacuation purposes. They will be at the disposal of the commander of the operations at Raipur (Chhattisgarh),” said Central Reserve Police Force director-general A.S. Gill.

The move to deploy IAF helicopters comes after the defence ministry gave the go-ahead to the IAF to open fire in self-defence if its aircraft were targeted by Maoist rebels. On October 1, Air Chief Marshal Pradeep Vasant Naik had said the IAF had sought permission from the defence ministry to open fire if its aircraft were fired at by the Maoists. The defence ministry’s clarification on the subject had given the IAF the authority to arm Mi-17 helicopters that are being used in counter-Maoist operations.

The IAF had sought the permission after two incidents where suspected Maoists had fired at IAF helicopters in Chhattisgarh and Gadchiroli in Maharashtra.

Apart from the IAF helicopters, three Dhruv Advanced Light Helicopters, inducted into the Border Security Force’s air wing, have been already been stationed at Ranchi and Raipur. To bring down casualties, the CRPF has contracted 80 doctors for the duration of the anti-Naxalite operation. The forces will also have access to GPS devices and satellite imagery of the jungles.

Central paramilitary forces like the CRPF, Indo-Tibetan Border Police and the BSF have been stationed across Naxalite-infested areas. They will work under a single command.

Home minister P. Chidambaram had last week reviewed the preparedness of the five states in launching the operation. The home ministry, which had delayed the operations because of the Jharkhand elections, is now busy fine-tuning its strategy.

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