



Vignettes of the Indian Air Force: 2023



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Endings lead to new beginnings and as 2023 draws to a close, it is time to take stock of significant achievements and milestones in the journey of the Indian Air Force, serving the nation with pride and valour. 2023 was also the first year in the centennial decade of the IAF as it marches ahead to its centenary in October 2032. The year saw the IAF overcoming many challenges and embracing opportunities in its quest for excellence. The year began with the IAF's maiden Air Defence Exercise, 'Veer Guardian 2023,' with the Japanese Air and Self Defence Forces. This involved four Su 30 MKI fighter aircraft flying to Hyakuri Air Base in Japan along with two C-17 and one IL-78 aircraft during the month of January 2023. In February-March 2023, the IAF's indigenous Light Combat Aircraft, Tejas, participated in its first-ever multilateral international exercise, 'Desert Flag VIII.' For this five Tejas aircraft along with two Globemaster C-17s flew to Al Dhafra Air Base in the UAE. The month of April 2023 witnessed IAF's Mirage 2000 aircraft participating in the bilateral Cobra Warrior Exercise in the United Kingdom. The same month the IAF participated in Exercise Orion in France with its Rafale aircraft. The month of July 2023 marked the first-ever flypast by the IAF in France's Bastille Day celebrations when three IAF Rafale aircraft along with a marching contingent participated in an event that signified India's growing strategic partnership with France. The month of September 2023 saw India participating for the first time in Exercise Bright Star, a biennial multilateral tri-service exercise in Egypt. Five Mig 29 (UPG) aircraft of the IAF took part in it, along with contingents from the Indian Army and Navy. The exercise, steered by the US CENTCOM, saw 34 nations participating in enhancing military diplomacy in the Middle East and North African region.

Throughout the year, the IAF undertook many Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) missions that vindicated its global reach and capability and the national resolve to provide humanitarian assistance. These missions involved evacuating not only the Indian diaspora abroad but foreign nationals as

1 | <https://capsindia.org/>

well. When a massive earthquake struck Turkey and Syria on February 6, 2023, India launched Operation Dost. Within hours, a C-17 aircraft of the IAF was launched, carrying search and rescue personnel along with a medical team. A total of five missions were launched providing comprehensive assistance from specially trained National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) personnel to setting up a 30-bed fully functional field hospital with medical professionals by the Indian Armed Forces. More than six tonnes of emergency relief assistance was also provided to Syria by a C-130J aircraft of the IAF.

In a remarkable operation by the C-130J aircraft of the IAF, on the night of April 27-28, 2023, the IAF rescued 121 people. The aircraft landed at Wadi Sayidna in Sudan, on a small airstrip with a degraded surface, no navigational aids and no refuelling facilities in the strife-torn territory near Khartoum. Upon landing, the aircraft engines were kept running while IAF Garud commandos secured the passengers and their luggage into the aircraft. The entire operation, along with the landing and take-off, was carried out at night on an unlit runway, with night vision goggles. Operation Kaveri saw the IAF undertake 17 flights by its transport fleet rescuing people from Port Sudan to safety in Saudi Arabia and India.

Serving as the first responder when an earthquake struck Nepal on November 6, 2023, the IAF launched a C 130J within hours with essential supplies providing medicines, relief material and trained personnel to assist in disaster relief. India provided 33 tonnes of emergency relief material to the affected families in Nepal through three sorties by C 130J aircraft of the IAF. India provided nearly 70 tonnes of humanitarian assistance to the people affected by the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict. This was accomplished by launching two C-17 aircraft of the IAF on October 22 and November 19, 2023, which landed at El-Arish airbase in Egypt, close to the Rafah crossing on Egypt's border with the Gaza Strip.

Meanwhile, the IAF helicopters carried out 226 sorties rescuing 1330 people and providing humanitarian and disaster relief when flash floods and landslides struck Himachal Pradesh in the month of August 2023. On Air Force Day, October 8, 2023, flash floods on the Teesta River in Sikkim and West Bengal caused mayhem, cutting off communications with many parts of Sikkim. The IAF promptly responded by carrying Garud commandos, communication equipment, fuel, medicines and search and rescue equipment by Chinook and Mi171V helicopters. More than 1700 people, including tourists and foreign nationals, were evacuated by the IAF. In March 2023, when major fires broke out in the state of Goa, including the Mhadei Wildlife Sanctuary, Morlem and Cortalim, the IAF deployed Mi 17 helicopters that carried out Bambi Bucket operations, dispensing water to contain the fire. The helicopters flew multiple missions dispensing 22,000 litres of water to fight the fire. When ethnic clashes broke out in Manipur during the month of May 2023, overnight, the IAF airlifted several columns of the Army and Assam Rifles that had to be deployed in the state.

In addition, IAF aircraft carried out sorties from nearby bases in Assam to keep a watch over the situation in the state. Between November 12 and 28, 2023, in response to the collapse of the Silkyara tunnel in Uttarakhand, the IAF promptly deployed its heavy-lift aircraft fleet, including C-17 Globemasters, to reach Indore, Bangalore, and Delhi. Additionally, C-130J Hercules was assigned the responsibility of airlifting equipment from Dehradun to Dharasu ALG, situated in Chinyalisaur, near the tunnel site. In addition to transporting loads, heavy-lift helicopters such as Mi-17s and Chinooks were mobilised in preparation to airlift rescued personnel to the closest medical facility.

On September 25, 2023, the IAF formally inducted the first C 295 aircraft in its inventory during a ceremony presided over by the Raksha Mantri, Shri Rajnath Singh, at the Hindon air base. Earlier in the month, this aircraft was handed over to Air Chief Marshal VR Chaudhari, the IAF Chief at the Airbus facility in Seville, Spain, where it was manufactured. The C295s which will boost the tactical airlift capability of the IAF will gradually replace the ageing HS 748 Avro aircraft by 2030-31. On October 4, 2023, the first LCA twin-seater trainer aircraft produced by HAL was handed over to the IAF Chief in Bengaluru. The induction of the trainer version will allow the IAF to post pilots directly to the squadrons after completing their training on Hawks. Seven more trainers are set to be delivered by March 2024. The IAF also inducted indigenously manufactured Counter Unmanned Aerial Systems (CUAS) during the year. Contracts were signed for 40 HTT trainer aircraft and six Dornier 228 aircraft to be manufactured by HAL.

Scripting history, the first batch of 153 Agniveer women trainees passed out from the training centre at Belgaum on December 2, 2023. Marching shoulder to shoulder with their male counterparts, these women successfully completed 22 weeks of their training at the Airmen Training Centre at Belgaum, Karnataka. On October 8, 2023, during the 91st anniversary celebrations of the IAF, Air Chief Marshal VR Chaudhari unveiled its new ensign, which includes the Air Force crest in the top right corner. The IAF crest features the national symbol, the Ashoka lion, at the top, with the words 'Satyameva Jayate' in Devanagari below it. Below the Ashoka lion, the Himalayan eagle, with its wings spread, denotes the fighting qualities of the IAF. A light-blue ring encircles the Himalayan eagle with the words 'Bharatiya Vayu Sena.' The motto of the IAF 'Nabhah Sprasham Diptam' or 'Touch the Sky With Glory,' is inscribed below the Himalayan eagle in golden Devanagari. The parade saw another first when it was commanded by Group Captain Shaliza Dhami, the first woman to assume command of a frontline IAF combat unit in March 2023. The parade also witnessed participation by Agniveer women for the first time.

The IAF created an impregnable shield for the air defence of the national capital region during the G-20 Summit in September 23. 24x7 Air Defence (AD) alerts and the deterrence resulting from them have

kept Indian airspace safe throughout the year. Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi flew in the first Tejas LCA twin seater delivered to the IAF in early December 23. This gesture by the PM not only reposed the trust placed by the government in the indigenously developed aircraft but also gave a significant boost to the Atmanirbharta drive of the nation. 2023 has indeed been an eventful and momentous year for the IAF, wherein it responded with alacrity and professionalism when called upon, whether within the country or abroad, in keeping with its motto of 'Touching the Sky with Glory.'

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

