

Dassault-Reliance aims to roll out Falcon jets in 2022

Rahul Singh

rahul.singh@hindustantimes.com

NAGPUR: As controversy swirls around the ₹59,000-crore Rafale deal, Dassault Reliance Aerospace Ltd (DRAL) has set its sight on assembling Falcon 2000 business jets at Nagpur by early 2022 for international customers and the joint venture company is upgrading infrastructure at its 31-acre facility here to meet the target, senior executives said on Thursday.

DRAL, Dassault's joint venture (JV) with Anil Ambani's Reliance Group, has taken maiden steps in that three-year journey, the executives said referring to the first locally built cockpit section and fuel tanks set to be dispatched to France for final assembly of Falcon jets at Dassault's Argenteuil facility. The cockpit section will be dis-

played at Asia's largest air show Aero India-2019, being staged near Bengaluru from February 20-24.

DRAL is assembling components for the Falcons and will eventually roll out the jets from a 150,000 square-foot production line as part of an offset commitment under the Rafale deal that requires the French plane-maker to source components worth 50% of the contract value locally.

In the run-up to the 2019 elections, the Congress has repeatedly attacked the government over the issue, accusing it of awarding the deal for 36 Rafale fighters to Dassault only on the condition that it would stitch up an alliance with Anil Ambani's Reliance Group for meeting its offset obligations. The government, Anil Ambani's company and Dassault have rubbished the allegations.

In three years, DRAL will roll out two Falcon jets every month from its new production line

BENOIT DUSSAUGEY, Dassault's senior executive VC (international)

The foundation of the DRAL facility near the Nagpur airport was laid in October 2017. "We are taking one step at a time. In three years, DRAL will roll out two Falcon jets every month from its new production line," said Benoit Dussaugey, Dassault's senior executive vice-president (international). He was interacting with a small group of journalists who were given access to the DRAL site for the first time. He said the political slugfest over the Rafale deal had not affected work at DRAL.

In an exclusive interview to HT this week, Congress president Rahul Gandhi had questioned the credentials of the Ambani firm, alleging that it was not qualified to carry out the offset contract.

Currently, DRAL has 22 technicians assembling different Falcon parts and the number is expected to swell to more than 600 by 2021-end as the firm prepares to roll out Falcons in a flyway condition, said DRAL CEO Sampathkumaran ST. It's a good beginning as there is a big void in the transport aircraft production sector in India, said Air Marshal KK Nohwar (retd), who heads the Centre for Air Power Studies.

"Any value addition, any technology coming in is something that will benefit the domestic aerospace sector," Nohwar added.

DRAL has no immediate plans to manufacture Rafale components in Nagpur as part of the off-

set contract. "We will not be manufacturing Rafale parts in India for the time being. That will be feasible only if we get more orders," said Dussaugey, referring to an Indian Air Force plan to build 110 fighter planes locally. Dassault is among global plane-makers competing for the project by allying with Indian firms under the government's Strategic Partnership model.

The NDA government's decision to enter into a government-to-government deal with France to buy 36 Rafale warplanes was announced in April 2015 with the deal signed a little over a year later. This replaced the UPA regime's decision to buy 126 Rafale aircraft, 108 of which were to be made in India by HAL using parts imported from France. The government and the Congress have been trading charges over the purchase in a raging row.