

Aircraft's Multi-Purpose Use Major Advantage, Says AJS Walia

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The government's increased focus on improving air connectivity in tier-II and tier-III cities is good news for Sikorsky, said AJS Walia, regional executive (India and South Asia) of the US-based aircraft manufacturer.

Speaking on the sidelines of the India Aviation 2016, where this Lockheed Martin company is promoting its M28 platform – the newest offering from its stable – Walia claimed, "I think it (M28) should be the preferred choice for connecting India's tier-II cities, especially north-eastern cities where the roads and runways are bad, as it is the only fixed-wing aircraft that is capable of short take-off and landing. It does not require a paved surface. It can take off from grass, field or gravel." He added, "We are already in talks with the government officials concerned and operators for the same."

The "versatility" of the 19-passenger aircraft, according to him, also lies in its ability to be used for multiple purposes – disaster relief, medical evacuation, VVIP travel or a combination of these activities.

'M28 most suited for tier-II cities'



ALL EXCITED: AJS Walia, Sikorsky regional executive (India and South Asia), speaks about the company's plans for the country

Incidentally, the two M28s procured by Nepal were used for relief work post the 2015 earthquake. "In fact, there is a lot of demand for this aircraft among neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and even Nepal. We are in dialogue with them and are hopeful of positive response," the senior official said, before going on to position the product – manufactured by its subsidiary firm PZL Mielec – as the best among its competitors.

Its USPs: Good range, endurance, load capacity and price that is expected to hover in the \$7-8.5 million bracket.

But the M28 isn't the only thing Sikorsky is excited about. It also has the 16 Seahawk S-70B contract with the Indian Navy to look forward to.

While the deal has been in the pipeline for long, Walia confirmed Sikorsky would sign on the dotted line by the end of 2016.

"We are resuming our dialogue in a couple of weeks. The escalation factor that we were negotiating earlier is no more a point of discussion as we are not asking for escalation now," he said. From the date of signing the contract, Sikorsky will most likely deliver the product in three years.

In Hyderabad, the firm that operates a joint venture with Tata Advanced Systems Ltd to build helicopter cabins, has no expansion plans. "We will do so as and when demand increases (sic)," Walia said.

He also sounded optimistic about the future of the aviation industry in India, courtesy the "tremendous change" in the government's approach. "The new government is willing to listen and support. That's definitely a positive shift," he said.

While refraining from commenting on the Kingfisher fiasco, he pointed out how setting foot in the industry wasn't "everybody's cup of tea". "Anyone who wants to must have deep pockets to invest, resilience to sustain themselves as it has a long gestation period and stringent parameters to qualify to be there...returns will not be available for long. If you can withstand this, you'll succeed," Walia said.