NAL gets cracking on smaller, smarter drones

Rasheed Kappan, DH News Service, Bengaluru, AUG 14 2018, 01:17AM IST | UPDATED: AUG 14 2018, 03:14AM IST

Union Minister Harsh Vardhan inspects the Suchan Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) at the National Aerospace Laboratories in Bengaluru on Monday.

Despite the rapid advances in Unmanned Aerial Vehicle/drone technology, a robust drone regulatory mechanism is still not in place in India. But what about the future? To get beyond catch-up, a new UAV design and integration facility was launched by the National Aerospace Laboratories (NAL) here on Monday.

Formally inaugurated by Union Minister for Science and Technology, Dr Harsh Vardhan, the facility houses design, analysis and related software,
3D printing/rapid prototyping, avionics testing and vehicle integration. As a NAL official explained: "This will enable the design
engineer to go through the complete development cycle,
from concept to product."

Diversifying deeper into the dynamic UAV world, the NAL has so far developed fixed-wing UAVs with a 2-meter wingspan.

Its focus now is on UAVs that can carry payloads ranging from 5 to 100 kg.

This is expected to provide services to agriculture,
forest, mining and other civil sectors. In the defence sector, surveillance has been a critical role of UAVs.

On Monday, the NAL demonstrated a static model of the Suchan, a 4.5-kg class UAV fitted with interchangeable day and night vision
cameras.

With a range of 10 km, the UAV is capable of reaching an altitude of 11,000 ft, limited only by the camera.

The new facility is expected to give a push to the NAL's efforts to design and build rotary UAVs, going beyond the fixed-wing mini-drones.

The NAL, along with the DRDO, has already designed and developed an indigenous rotary engine for application in UAVs.

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Saras commercial flight in 3 years

The recently revived Saras passenger aircraft project will get into commercial flight within the next three years under the UDAN scheme, Union Minister Harsh Vardhan said on Monday.

The project was halted after a crash. But now it has been revived and test flights are in progress, he added. The 19-seater aircraft will be integrated into the UDAN project, designed to revive many defunct aerodromes, the British-era facilities included. This, he reiterated, will give a boost to regional connectivity.

The second prototype of the indigenously built Saras had crashed on March 6, 2009, killing two wing commanders and a squadron leader in Bidadi.