

Press Release by NAL/CSIR

On 6th March 2009, the second prototype (PT2) of the Light Transport Aircraft SARAS, being developed by the National Aerospace Laboratories (NAL), Bengaluru (belonging to the Council of Scientific & Industrial Research – CSIR), met with a tragic accident where all the three flight crew, Wg. Cdr. K. Praveen, Wg. Cdr. D. K. Shah and Sqn. Ldr. S. Elayaraja, belonging to Aircraft and Systems Testing Establishment (ASTE) of the Indian Air Force (IAF), lost their lives. PT2 had already completed 48 test flights while the first prototype PT1 has so far completed 128 flights. These test flights preceded by numerous low speed and high speed taxi trials on ground had given the SARAS team a high measure of confidence in the performance and systems of the aircraft.

The test objective of this particular flight on 6th March was to carry out one engine (PT6A - 67 of Pratt and Whitney, Canada) switching off and relighting in the air, a mandatory requirement of the flight development programme towards aircraft certification. This was to be done first on the left engine and then on the right engine.

The aircraft took off at 1455 hours from the HAL airport and climbed to 9000 ft and carried out general flying as planned where the aircraft behavior and all engine parameters were found to be normal. Thereafter, as per the laid down procedure, asymmetric thrust was simulated by throttling back one of the engines and controllability including dummy approaches and overshoots were fully checked. After this, the aircraft climbed to about 9000 feet and flew to the designated area for carrying out the engine relighting test. The left engine was then switched off following the proper procedure and everything was found to be normal. After about one minute the relight of the left engine was attempted and the same was communicated by the flight crew. Soon after, the aircraft started losing height. All attempts of communication with the flight crew failed and the

Radar contact with the Air Traffic Control (ATC) was also lost. Within about 10 minutes, it was learnt that the aircraft had crashed near Bidadi and subsequently had caught fire resulting in the sad death of the flight crew and total loss of the aircraft. Immediately all the concerned authorities were informed about the accident.

The investigation by the Director General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) into the cause of the accident has already started and NAL as the design agency is providing all the support required with inputs from ASTE as appropriate. NAL is also examining various possibilities, analyzing the same and will provide the inputs to DGCA. The objective is to get at the whole truth as early as possible.

SARAS is the first attempt towards designing and developing a civilian transport aircraft in the country. ASTE has been a partner in this programme and is providing invaluable support through flight testing. In spite of this tragic accident, the developmental programme has to be carried forward and taken to its logical conclusion of certification. NAL/CSIR has begun chalking out a plan for the same which would include conversion of first prototype to the standard of second prototype with higher power engine and realization of the Production Standard Aircraft (PSA) at the earliest. Findings of the DGCA accident investigation committee would be fully absorbed and necessary design and flight test programme modifications, if called for, will be carried out. The findings of the Committee, on completion of the investigation and approval of the same by the Competent Authority will be communicated to the media. Discussions will be held with design and flight test specialists within the country and outside, where required, in all critical areas to ensure that the programme moves forward smoothly.

Thus, there is a strong resolve and determination on the part of NAL/CSIR to get the SARAS programme back on its rails at the earliest and move towards the objective of developing and productionising the first civilian aircraft of the country,

thus making SARAS the forerunner for future civilian aircraft programmes. NAL/CSIR is also determined to meet its commitments to its launch customer, IAF and production partners, HAL with regard to IAF's requirements of 15 aircraft.

We are grateful for the message of condolences and firm assurance of support for continuation of the SARAS programme from Prof S K Brahmachari, Director General, CSIR, Dr T Ramaswami, Secretary, DST, Dr G Madhavan Nair, Secretary, DoS & Chairman, Research Council, NAL and Mr M Natarajan, Scientific Adviser to Raksha Mantri & Secretary, Department of Defence R&D and Senior Officials at Air HQ. We are also grateful to Dr APJ Abdul Kalam, former President of India, Dr R A Mashelkar, Former DG, CSIR, Prof CNR Rao, Scientific Adviser to Prime Minister, Dr R Chidambaram, Scientific Adviser to Cabinet, Dr V K Aatre, Former SA to RM, Mr A K Bawaja, Chairman, HAL, Dr S R Valluri, Prof R Narasimha and other Former Directors of NAL, Vice Adml (Retd) Raman Puri, Former Head of IDS, Mr P S Subramanyam, Programme Director (CA) and Director- ADA, Directors of CSIR Laboratories/Institutes and a host of well wishers of this programme from India and abroad for their words of comfort and urging us not to get disheartened by this incident and move forward resolutely. We would also like to acknowledge the support from the media who have been very sympathetic to our cause in their reporting of the incident.