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India's ocean surveillance ship starts harbour trials

India's indigenously designed classified missile tracking and ocean surveillance ship (OSS) is undergoing harbour trials at Vishakhapatnam on the country's east coast, ahead of starting sea trials by the end of the year, security sources told Jane's.

Thereafter, the 15,000-tonne vessel will be handed over to the National Technical Research Organisation (NTRO), India's sole technical intelligence agency, to gather electronic intelligence (ELINT) and monitor domestic strategic missile and under-development ballistic missile defence (BMD) programmes.

Accompanying NTRO personnel on board the OSS will be technicians and scientists from the government-run Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) responsible for India's multiple missile programmes.

Designed by private-sector Vik-Sandvik Design India (VSDI) and costing around INR15 billion (USD218 million), the 175 m OSS is powered by two imported 9,000 kW engines capable of attaining speeds of 21 kt.

It is equipped with three 1,200 kW auxiliary generators capable of generating more than 14 MW of power to operate its tracking, and primary X-band and secondary S-band active electronically scanned array (AESA) radar to monitor and support India's BMD programme. Operated by a 300-member crew, the OSS can also accommodate a helicopter.

The ship's surveillance systems, housed in three dome-shaped antennae equipped with advanced sensors and radar, are also capable of accurately tracking incoming enemy missiles, security sources told Janes .

"We have successfully finished basin trials [of the OSS] and we expect to deliver the ship by December [2018]," Rear Admiral Sarath Babu (retd), chairman of the Ministry of Defence (MoD)-owned Hindustan Shipyard Limited (HSL) where the OSS has been under construction since 2013, told *The Economic Times* on 18 July.

He declined to elaborate on the missile-range instrumentation ship, designated VC11184 after the covered and 'secured' yard where its construction began five years ago.

The OSS broke cover recently, however, and with its distinctive globe-shaped radar located astern, is now visible from the Vizag channel adjoining HSL.

The entire OSS programme is monitored by the Prime Minister's Office via the National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval, with even the Indian Navy (IN) denying all knowledge of its existence.

This confidential arrangement duplicates the earlier one from the 1970s involving India's Advanced Technology Vessel (ATV) programme to indigenously design and build a nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine (SSBN), also at Vishakhapatnam.

The ATV project resulted eventually in INS Arihant , the 6,000-tonne lead SSBN boat that was 'quietly' commissioned into IN service in August 2016 without any induction pronouncements. India plans on building four additional Arihant-class SSBNs at the private Ship Building Centre (SCB) at Vishakhapatnam.

Consequently, HSL shipyard, which was taken over by the MoD in 2010, was selected to build the OSS as it adjoins the SCB and is relatively secluded with a covered building dock for building vessels up to 80,000 DWT.

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