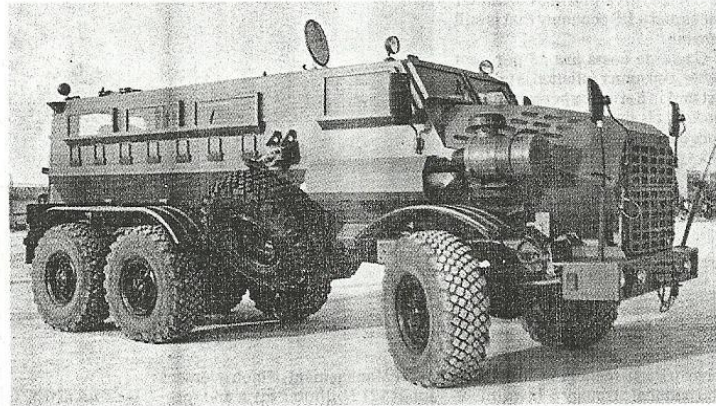


# Mahindra anti-mine vehicles for Naxal ops

New product aimed to address long-awaited need in counter-insurgency, buyers optimistic



DESIGNED BY SOUTH AFRICAN VEHICLE PROTECTION SPECIALIST, OMC, the Jharkhand Police's new Mine Protected Vehicle - India (MPV-I) has been tested in South Africa to global standards, using million-dollar mannequins, and found capable of protecting passengers even when subjected to a blast from 21 kilos of TNT

AJAI SHUKLA  
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FOR a decade, jawans travelling across the Naxal belt in shoddy mine-protected vehicles (MPVs) built by the Ordnance Factory Board rested their hopes for survival on a single bizarre test. In this, a live pig was strapped into an MPV, which was then subjected to a mine blast at a Ministry of Defence facility near Chandigarh. The pig survived and so, too, it was assumed, would the jawans.

Beginning today, these policemen have more to pin their hopes on. At its production facility near here, Defence Land Systems India (DLSI) handed over to the Jharkhand Police the first of six modern mine-protected vehicles for that landmine-prone state. Designed by South African vehicle protection specialist, OMC, the Jharkhand Police's new Mine Protected Vehicle - India (MPV-I) has been tested in South Africa to global standards, using million-dollar mannequins, and found capable of protecting passengers even when subjected to a blast from 21 kilos of TNT.

DLSI, a joint venture between the Mahindra group and UK-based BAE Systems (74:26, respectively), anticipates a burgeoning market for protected vehicles. The Mahindra group began its charge into the defence market with protected vehicles, selling about 1,500 smaller models since 2001, including the Rakshak, the Marksman and the Rapid Intervention Vehicle. But the big money is in MPVs, each of which costs close to ₹1 crore. In that, there was little headway until this first order from the Jharkhand Police.

#### FELT NEED

"The equipping of police forces in the Naxal-affected states with 300 MPVs will reduce casualties by some 90 per cent," argues Brigadier (retired) Khutab

Hai, who heads Mahindra's defence business. This year alone, almost 300 security personnel have been killed or injured in blasts from 76 improvised explosive devices (IEDs), the crude but powerful devices that insurgents have mastered.

In the Maoist heartland of Chhattisgarh, MPVs have disappointed. In early 2005, there was euphoria after all 17 policemen travelling in an MPV survived a Naxal IED attack in Narayanpur, Bastar. It was short-lived, as the Naxals modified their tactics. In their next attack, in Bijapur district in September 2005, they replaced the 10-kilo Narayanpur IED with a massive 40-kg IED, targeting an MPV procured from the Ordnance Factory, Medak. The force of that blast threw the MPV up in the air, killing 24 CRPF jawans whose bodies were barely recognisable. After that, the security forces in Chhattisgarh shrink from travelling in MPVs, except on blacktopped highways where no IEDs can be buried.

"An MPV makes an attractive target for the Naxals and, as we increase the armour, they just increase the explosive in the IED. In Chhattisgarh we use MPVs only for activities like convoy escort, where they can be used as mobile pillboxes from where policemen can fire on insurgents attempting an ambush. But for off-the-road movement, the security forces have to rely on smaller, less conspicuous vehicles or, better still, move on foot," says Brigadier (retired) Basant Ponwar, who heads the state government's Counter Terrorism and Jungle Warfare College in Kanker.

As recently as June 10, near Dantewada in Bastar, 10 policemen travelling in an MPV at night were killed in an IED attack.

#### AHEAD

The Jharkhand Police, which

has already bought 150 smaller protected vehicles from DLSI, is confident its new MPV-I will serve their purpose. Says B B Pradhan, the state's additional director-general of police: "Our first responsibility is to protect our men from the explosions of landmines. There is no real fool-proof protection from landmine attacks, the world over. But technology is improving everyday... I am very optimistic that the MPV-I will prove successful."

Besides purchases by Naxal-affected states, DLSI hopes for orders from the army, a potentially large user of MPVs. There is a viewpoint that MPVs could serve a dual purpose, for counter-insurgency operations in peacetime and to convey jawans into enemy territory during war, for attacks on enemy strong points or important towns. While no army requirement has been formalised, or tender issued, the acceptance of this viewpoint would make the army a major buyer of MPVs.

The MPV-I traces its design back to the redoubtable Casspir MPVs, which the Indian Army used extensively in Jammu & Kashmir. The special armoured steel for the MPV-I's protective body comes from Sweden; it is built into a monocoque body, using kits imported from South Africa. The engine and chassis are from Russian Ural vehicles that are manufactured at Haldia, West Bengal. Using these inputs, DLSI has the capacity to build 100-120 MPV-I per year.

The Tatas and Ashok Leyland have also tried to crack the MPV market, but without success. Their MPVs are significantly lighter than DLSI's and are designed to withstand just eight to 10 kilos of TNT, compared to the 21 kg blast-resistance of the MPV-I. The six-wheeled MPV-I also provides greater safety than the four-wheeled Tata and Leyland MPVs.