

9 years after Atal announced, work will begin on the Rohtang tunnel

Afcons Infrastructure-Strabag to build 8.8-km tunnel to keep pass open year round

**SHISHIR GUPTA
& AMITAV RANJAN**
NEW DELHI | SEPTEMBER 19

TO secure round-the-year lines of communication to eastern Ladakh, the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) early this month approved Afcons Infrastructure, in collaboration with European firm Strabag, as the building contractor for the 8.8-km-long Rohtang tunnel.

The approved cost of the project now stands at Rs 1450 crore. Deadline: end of 2014.

This comes nearly nine years after then PM Atal Behari Vajpayee laid the foundation for the tunnel on June 3, 2000. The UPA government selected Afcons-Strabag from three bidders on September 7 — Gammon India and L&T were the other two.

The horse-shoe tunnel, at a height of 3,000-3,100 m, will ensure that the 3978-meter-high Rohtang Pass will be open all year. At present, the pass is blocked between November and May by heavy snow. Lying on the Manali-Leh axis, this is the only route to Ladakh as even the other route through the Zoji La pass on the Srinagar-Drass-Kargil-Leh highway gets blocked by snow for nearly four months in an year. These two routes are vital to feed military supplies into the sub-sector west (facing Aksai Chin) and the Siachen Glacier.

Rohtang tunnel was identified as one of the top priorities by Shyam Saran, Prime Minister's special envoy, as part of his border infrastructure project report. He sug-

gested alternative routes for Baralacha La and Tanglang La, too — both high mountain passes that lie on the route to Leh and beyond.

Government sources told *The Sunday Express* that the Defence Ministry had to come back to the CCS on the Rohtang tunnel as the original in-principle approval was given in September 2003 for Rs 880 crore with the proviso that after tendering — but before award of the contract — it would have to approach the apex body with firm figures.

It is learnt that before tendering, the Ministry hired an international consultant to assess the cost and time schedule. The consultant estimated the cost at around Rs 1350 crore. Add to this 8 per cent of



The tunnel under the pass will ensure all-weather, all-year access to Leh

consultant's fee, the project cost was pegged little over Rs 1400 crore. However, when tenders were opened, the lowest bid was Afcons's Rs 1450 crore. Early this month, Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Prem Dhumal met Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and discussed the need to speed up the tunnel's construction and build a broad gauge railway line to Leh.