Major Abhilasha Barak gets the '2025 UN Military Gender Advocate of the Year Award' for her service with UNIFIL, Lebanon

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News

UN Secretary-General António Guterres presented the '2025 UN Military Gender Advocate of the Year Award' to Major Abhilasha Barak of the Indian Army on 5 June 2026 at UN Headquarters, New York, at the ceremony for the International Day of UN Peacekeepers. She serves with the Indian Battalion of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) in south Lebanon as Female Engagement Team Commander and Gender Focal Point. In six months she ran 539 gender-focused field activities, reaching more than 5,000 women and girls. She is the third Indian to win the award. The award was announced in May 2026; PM Narendra Modi congratulated her on 7 June.

Key facts

Award	2025 UN Military Gender Advocate of the Year – 5 June 2026, New York; presented by António Guterres
Role	Female Engagement Team Commander & Gender Focal Point – Indian Battalion, UNIFIL (south Lebanon); since June 2025
Work	539 field activities in 6 months (highest in the mission); 5,000+ women and girls; 75 Lebanese women got Indian ITEC scholarships

Profile	Rohtak (Haryana); Delhi Technological University (2016); OTA Chennai (2017); Army Air Defence (2018); May 2022 – Army's first woman combat aviator
Award history	Started 2016 by the Office of Military Affairs, UN Dept of Peace Operations; based on UNSC Resolution 1325 (2000)
Earlier Indians	Maj Suman Gawani (2019, South Sudan – UNMISS); Maj Radhika Sen (2023, DR Congo – MONUSCO)

Background

- UNIFIL: set up on 19 March 1978 by UN Security Council Resolutions 425 and 426 to confirm Israel's withdrawal from south Lebanon; HQ at Naqoura. Its mandate was expanded by Resolution 1701 after the 2006 war. Resolution 2790 (28 Aug 2025) gave a final extension to 31 Dec 2026, with withdrawal from 1 Jan 2027. As of 23 Sep 2026 it had 7,565 troops from 46 countries; India 633 (fifth).
- India and UN peacekeeping: began with an army field hospital sent to Korea in 1950. In 2007 it sent the first all-women Formed Police Unit (FPU) to Liberia. International Day of UN Peacekeepers – 29 May (start of UNTSO, 1948).
- Geography: Lebanon lies on the eastern Mediterranean coast; capital Beirut. Syria to the north and east, Israel to the south. The UN-drawn 'Blue Line' (2000) separates Israel and Lebanon. Its flag carries a cedar tree.
- Defence / polity: in the Babita Puniya case (17 Feb 2020) the Supreme Court ordered Permanent Commission for women Army officers. The Army Aviation Corps was formed on 1 Nov 1986; Abhilasha trained at the Combat Army Aviation Training School (CATS), Nashik.

Tamil Nadu link: Abhilasha Barak was born at the Military Hospital, Wellington (Nilgiris), while her father (a retired colonel) was attending the Defence Services Staff College (DSSC) there. In 2017 she trained at the Officers Training Academy (OTA, 1963), Alandur, Chennai.

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