

## 'Hugging saint' treats stressed Indian soldiers

Mata Amritanandamayi, the spiritual leader known as the "hugging saint", has turned her attention to the Indian army due to concern over suicide and depression rates.

By Chris Irvine

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The spiritual leader who calls herself Amma, is known to hug up to 50,000 people a day, and has dispatched her yoga and meditation instructors to help the stressed soldiers.

Amma is said to have hugged more than 30 million people around the world over the past three decades as she spreads the message of compassion.

The 55-year-old's adopted name means "Mother of Absolute Bliss". She is well known for her humanitarian work, including her role after the Asian tsunami when her organisation donated a million rupees (£12 million) to the relief effort.



Mata Amritanandamayi is known to have 30 million people in the past three decades Photo: AP

India's million-plus army has not fought a full-scale war for decades, and it appears to lose more troops to suicide than it does to civil riots and borderline skirmishes.

It is thought that many troops are suffering from low morale, poor working conditions, insufficient home leave and bad pay.

Amma's lessons involve a combination of yoga and meditation that she drew up specifically for the troops.

At least 25,000 soldiers are said to have already taken part in the sessions and more were planned.

Swammi Nijamrita, one of Amma's followers, who is overseeing the project, said: "There had been a lot in the media about the number of suicides in the military and Amma wanted to help.

"The response has been great. We did not expect such a response.

"We thought people would take part because they had been told to but they say that the classes make them feel more peaceful.

"For us, being peaceful does not mean being unable to react. It means being centred and not being distracted by other things."