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By Joris Janssen Lok

NATO is desperately short of attack and transport helicopters that can support its International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, senior sources in NATO Headquarters say. In recent weeks, the alliance has been examining multiple options to correct the shortfall.

Proposals on the table range from improved training and logistic support for deployed helicopters, to a commonly funded modernization of 20-odd Russian-built, Czech-owned Mil Mi-8 Hip transport helos that could then be used to form a multinational transport pool for Afghanistan-type operations.

Representatives from several NATO nations will be discussing these options at a seminar in Brussels, a senior European diplomat in NATO Headquarters tells Aviation Week & Space Technology.

"I believe the U.S. will also shortly come forward with specific proposals to help solve this problem," he adds.

The helicopter shortage is the "single biggest operational problem" that is hampering the day-to-day operations of ISAF, a 41,000-strong multinational mission led by NATO and comprising troops from 38 nations, including 14 that are not members of the alliance.

"We're beseeching, begging, doing everything we can to convince nations to contribute more rotary-wing aviation assets, both transport helicopters and attack helicopters," a Canadian NATO official says.

"It's not that NATO nations don't have helicopters. The problem is that they're very expensive to ship to Afghanistan and to operate and maintain them there. I think there are several nations that prefer to keep their helicopters at home for this reason."

At the Shephard Heli-Power conference in The Hague, operational commanders stressed that ISAF is struggling with a "constant imbalance of demand versus availability of both attack and transport helicopters."

"Without helicopters, operations in southern Afghanistan are not possible. There's a lack of road infrastructure and a high threat of improvised explosive devices and ambushes by Taliban and other opposing militant forces," says Maj. Gen. Ton van Loon of the Royal Netherlands Army. He returned from Kandahar earlier this year after having commanded ISAF's Regional Command (RC) South.

"If we don't have the helicopters, we must admit defeat. It is unacceptable that a soldier dies because the medevac helicopter and its attack helicopter escort are not available. Several times, we came very close to not getting this right because we were stretched," van Loon told the conference.

The 11,600-strong RC South includes the troubled provinces of Helmand (where British forces provide the bulk of the ISAF presence), Kandahar (Canadian forces) and Uruzgan (Dutch and Australian forces). Fighting has been on the increase in recent months.

Aviation assets available to RC South are primarily British, Dutch and U.S., with the British typically having eight Chinook HC2 transport helicopters, eight Longbow Apache attack helicopters and five Lynx Mk. 7 battlefield support helicopters divided between Kandahar Air Field and the main forward operating base in Helmand, Camp Bastion.

The Dutch have three CH-47D Chinooks at Kandahar plus five AH-64D Apaches forward-deployed at Tarin Kowt, Uruzgan.

U.S. Army Aviation has about 100 helicopters in country (including 24 Apaches, 25 Chinooks and 50 UH-60 Black Hawks), but many of these are assigned to the 13,900-strong Regional Command East, where most of the 15,100 U.S. troops are based.

At times, other nations, notably Australia, contribute a couple of Chinooks to RC South that are normally based at Kandahar, while there are also some Mi-8 Hips used by Afghan special forces.

The helicopters available to RC South are in constant demand, says van Loon, not just because of the terrain and the threat of IEDs, but also because of their swiftness of response. “Thanks to helicopters, we can offer immediate support to troops in contact, and we can use surprise and vertical envelopment tactics to attack the weak points of our opponent. Unfortunately, we cannot meet the demand and we have to do something about that.”

A decision recently was made to charter about 20 commercial helicopters on a wet-lease basis to take on routine supply flights in RC South. Although these, too, would likely have to be escorted by attack helos, the extra capacity would free up Chinooks and Black Hawks. These could be dedicated to supporting troops in contact and to conduct preplanned air-maneuver operations to chase the opposing forces, officials in NATO headquarters say.

Van Loon says NATO “would probably have to beg the U.S. for another extension,” but the current U.S. Army aviation brigade assigned to ISAF—which has been in the theater longer than planned—is now expected to go home in early 2008, say NATO officials in Brussels.

“The U.S. secretary of Defense has told NATO to basically suck it up and to take care of the problem. That’s why we’re chartering the commercial helos,” the Canadian official says.

At the Heli-Power conference, however, U.S. Army Col. Walter Golden said that at least two U.S. Army aviation units at Ft. Campbell, Ky., are preparing to deploy to Afghanistan. These would be the 4/101st, which is the first to fly the new-built Sikorsky UH-60M; as well as the 7/101st, which is the first unit equipped with the new Boeing CH-47F Chinook. Both belong to the 159th Combat Aviation Brigade.

The UH-60M and CH-47F both have Rockwell Collins’s new Common Avionics Architecture System (CAAS).

This could be one step toward more standardization on the flight lines in Afghanistan, something that’s strongly advocated by van Loon.

“When I was commanding RC South,” says van Loon, “we had four national Chinook detachments on the ramp at Kandahar, from Australia, the Netherlands, the U.K. and the U.S.—but their respective aircraft were so different that their mechanics could not work on the other nations’ aircraft; nor could the aircrew fly in aircraft other than those of their own unit. Because we can’t share the logistics and maintenance, the whole thing becomes more expensive and more complicated to organize, which is directly translated in loss of potential.”

The logistics and maintenance workload is extremely high as it is, Golden adds. The operational tempo for helicopters in Afghanistan is very high. According to Golden, the U.S. Apaches in country manage an 83% and Chinooks an 82% mission-capable rate. The Apaches fly 51 hr. per month and the Chinooks 43.6 hr. on average, “a four times higher operational tempo than we anticipated for the global war on terror,” he says.

According to van Loon, the helicopter shortage is also caused by nations not always sending the most suitable helicopter types, particularly during Afghanistan’s hot summer months. “I will mention my own country’s Eurocopter Cougar Mk. 2 as an example: In winter it can carry 14 troops, but by April, temperatures have risen and their payload is reduced to just four troops,” he says. “They had to stop flying after 7:00 a.m. because of the heat.”

Officers speaking at Heli-Power agreed that the Chinook is the most suitable transport helicopter in Afghanistan, because of the way it’s able to deal with the prevailing hot-and-high conditions.

Operational commanders at the conference said that in order to make the most of the limited assets, those nations that contribute helicopters must urgently set up combined, integrated rotary-wing aviation exercises equivalent to the U.S.-organized “Flag” series of live flying exercises held by the fixed-wing fighter community.

The only way to improve the situation in the near term is to better integrate national helicopter contributions and to try to enhance interoperability between them, they say.

While “each individual unit is doing an excellent job,” the “pieces of the jigsaw puzzle, in terms of each nation’s specific techniques, tactics and procedures, are not aligned,” officers warned.

“Integration of the different national army aviation units in the theater is a must,” says Col. Ron Hagemeyer of the Royal Netherlands Air Force. He came back from Kandahar just days before the conference, having led the Dutch Air Task Force in

southern Afghanistan.

“There are differences in the rules of engagement, national caveats in terms of targeting guidelines, different regulations on handling of dangerous cargo, different procedures on how to transport troops, different limitations on weather and the use of night vision goggles, as well as different tactics,” he says.

For example, British and Dutch Apaches normally fly at around 1,800 ft., above the range of small-arms fire, while U.S. Apaches operate at much lower altitudes, officers at the conference said.

“If a landing zone is not properly prepared, with cargo and troops ready to join the helicopter in accordance with the relevant national regulations, a Chinook may have to spend 15-20 min. sitting on the ground, wasting time and fuel while being vulnerable,” says Hagemeyer.

“For years, the fixed-wing fighter community has had integrated multinational exercises.”

“We need to take a big step and to establish a major platform where rotary-wing aviators from several nations can talk and train together in day/night multinational, multi-type, multi-ship operations in brownout as well as hot-and-high environmental conditions.”

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