AIRLIFT CRAIG HOYLE / OSLO

Norway rejects A400M

Government decides to upgrade C-130H transports and lease strategic airlift capability

The Norwegian government has opted against involvement in the Airbus Military A400M project until at least 2012, and will instead upgrade its fleet of six Lockheed Martin C-130H tactical transports and lease shared strategic airlift capability as required. Confirmed last week, the move effectively rules out any Norwegian industry participation in the 180-aircraft A400M project.

The transport aircraft decision is contained in a final transformation document for the 2005-8 period delivered to Norwegian chief of defence Gen Sigurd Frisvold by defence minister Kristin Krohn Devold on 14 September. Norway earlier this year released first details of the armed forces transformation process, which is intended to release more funds for operational and peacekeeping commitments (*Flight International*, 8-14 June).

Devold says Norway will wait until after the country's next four-year spending plan to measure the effectiveness of a German-led NATO strategic airlift initiative, which she says will be "much more cost-effective" than an equipment purchase. "If we had made a decision this year to buy a particular aircraft, it would have bound our hands on the financial side for years." A decision on a future tactical transport programme will now be made around 2012.

Devold has also urged NATO to examine the tactical transport aircraft requirements of its 26 partner nations, and backs the formation of a commonly funded airlift cell equipped with shared assets such as the A400M. "For smaller countries, the multinational-funded project will always be wiser," she says.

Air force sources indicate an extensive upgrade programme will be required to extend operations of the service's C-130Hs beyond 2006, with the aircraft expected to need modifications, including a wing replacement. Such work could extend the type's service life until around 2018, they say. The Norwegian air force is also still interested in leasing one or two tanker/transport aircraft.

LAUNCH VEHICLES

DARPA hands out Falcon contracts

Four companies have been selected to continue work on small launch vehicles under the US Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency's (DARPA) Falcon programme to demonstrate a system capable of striking anywhere in the world from the USA within hours.

AirLaunch, Lockheed Martin, Microcosm and Space Exploration Technologies (SpaceX) have been awarded contracts potentially worth $8-12 million to design and possibly demonstrate low-cost rapid-reaction launchers.

Under the Falcon concept, a manoeuvrable re-entry vehicle – called the enhanced common aero vehicle (ECAV) – carrying a penetrator warhead or other payload would be launched by an expendable small launch vehicle (SLV) or reusable hypersonic cruise vehicle (HCV).

Last month, a Lockheed Martin-led team was awarded a contract potentially worth more than $105 million to design and possibly demonstrate a hypersonic-technology testbed vehicle under the Falcon programme.

Under the SLV portion of the programme, each of the four contractors will complete detailed design of highly common small satellite launch vehicle (SSLV) and ECAV launch vehicle (ECLV) demonstrator systems. The contracts include the option for an orbital flight demonstration of the SSLV by 2007.

LOCKHEED MARTIN

A Lockheed Martin concept showing an HCV deploying an ECAV

Air Launch is proposing a rocket released from a transport aircraft, Microcosm its Scorpius low-cost booster, and SpaceX its private-venture Falcon launch vehicle.

The SSLV is required to launch a 450kg (1,000lb) payload into a 160km (100-mile) circular orbit at a total cost of less than $5 million based on 20 launches a year.

The ECLV is required to carry a 900kg ECAV over a range of at least 16,650km (9,000nm) with a surge rate of 16 launches in 24h. Both systems must attain alert status within 24h, from which the SSLV is able to launch within 24h and the ECLV in less than 2h.

TESTING

Australia plans new UAV trials

Australia is to trial General Atomics Aeronautical Systems' Mariner medium-altitude unmanned air vehicle and Northrop Grumman's RQ-4A Global Hawk high-altitude long-endurance UAV over its north-west shelf oilfields in 2005.

Defence minister Robert Hill says the trials will support Australia's proposed acquisition of an endurance intelligence and reconnaissance UAV system under its air force-led Project Air 7000.

The UAVs will operate from the Royal Australian Air Force's "bare base" at Learmonth in northern Western Australia for the trials, he says. However, Australian Department of Defence sources indicate the Global Hawk assessment may be conducted as part of the US Air Force's Pacific surveillance experiments planned for mid-2005, and missions could be launched from Guam.

The Mariner demonstrator is a modified Altair medium-altitude long-endurance UAV originally built for NASA. A proposed production version would use a modified MQ-9 Predator B airframe with larger wings and conformal fuel tanks.

Australia staged a series of operational trials of the RQ-4A in 2001 from Edinburgh air base – now a regular staging and pre-deployment post for Global Hawks transiting from the continental USA to the Middle East to support US operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

■ The Australian government has approved "technical discussions" on possible formal participation and industrial involvement in the US Navy's Multi-Mission Maritime aircraft (MMA) programme, says Hill.

Recent air force experience in using the Lockheed Martin AP-3C Orion for over-land surveillance in support of US forces in Iraq has provided a strong knowledge base to participate in the project, he says.