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The Washington Post

Afghan air force hobbled by safety and maintenance problems

By Joshua Partlow

07/04/2012

A series of maintenance and safety problems has grounded much of the Afghan air force's fleet of planes and helicopters in recent months, a situation that the defense minister calls a "grand failure" and one that highlights the challenges facing the country's fledgling security forces as U.S. and other NATO troops start to withdraw.

The bulk of Afghanistan's Russian-made helicopter fleet was barred from flying last month to undergo extensive inspections, following a grounding of cargo airplanes late last year because of maintenance problems, according to Afghan and NATO officials.

"The issue as a whole is important," Defense Minister Abdul Rahim Wardak said in a recent interview. "We don't have all the air assets which are required for independent operations. It has to become serious."

Unlike the Afghan army and police force, which have recruited tens of thousands of additional personnel in recent years, Afghanistan's air force has been slower to develop. Wardak has repeatedly asked NATO to supply fighter jets to establish the force's attack capability and protect Afghan airspace, but those requests have been denied on the grounds of high costs and more pressing priorities for the young military.

So far, NATO has supplied about 100 aircraft toward its target of 140 for the air force. But many of those, including fleets of 43 helicopters and 15 cargo planes, have been grounded or removed

from service in recent months because of problems with maintenance, a lack of spare parts, safety concerns and the need for more-thorough inspections, according to Afghan and NATO officials.

“We have raised the issue from the beginning that we were having a lot of problems,” said Wardak, who added that despite NATO’s contributions, Afghanistan’s air force is not as strong as it used to be. “In 1992, when I was chief of staff of the Afghan army, I had 450 types of air assets. Today, we have 102. One hundred two, but mostly on the ground.”

In the fight against the Taliban, Afghan soldiers and police rely heavily on NATO planes and helicopters to provide air support, evacuate their wounded and dead, and supply bases around the country. The cargo planes and helicopters were supposed to help Afghan forces manage logistics and supplies for their soldiers as U.S. troops pull out over the next two years.

The decision to halt flights of the Mi-17 and Mi-35 helicopters last month came after a NATO review found that Afghan capabilities did not meet the manufacturer’s requirements, according to a NATO official. About half the helicopters had been in the Afghan fleet since NATO began advising in 2007. Others were given later by the United States, Russia, the United Arab Emirates and other countries. The helicopters now need up to a month of comprehensive inspections before they’re ready to fly. About a quarter have completed the inspections.

The fleet of 15 C-27A transport airplanes was grounded in December because of maintenance problems involving a subcontractor of Alenia Aermacchi North America, which refurbished the aircraft, according to NATO officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive matters. The grounding was reported last month by the Wall Street Journal. The subcontractor, a unit of L-3 Communications Holdings, had poor and incomplete records on cannibalized parts, tools and other safety issues, the officials said. This spring, Alenia terminated the maintenance subcontract and hired DynCorp International instead, the officials said.

An L-3 official said the problems with the aircraft went beyond maintenance issues. Parts were missing, the official said, and they “were old aircraft in pretty rough shape.”

An Alenia spokesman said the company is “continuing to work closely with the U.S. Air Force on the regeneration” of the fleet, adding that several of the planes “have flown, and we are confident we are headed in the right direction.”

A maintenance overhaul of the planes — including cleaning, inspection of parts and electrical systems, and flight tests — is underway. The fleet is scheduled to be ready by fall, one NATO official said.

“We’ve stood down these fleets until we have all the data available to support our confidence in their safety,” the official said, adding that “the shortage of available aircraft is a concern shared” by NATO’s training command in Afghanistan.

“What we’re striving for is developing a force that is capable, affordable, sustainable and right for Afghanistan,” Brig. Gen. Timothy Ray, the commanding general of NATO’s air training

command, said in a statement. “We have a saying that sometimes you have to slow down to get somewhere faster.”

Wardak said the problems could have been avoided if NATO had bought the Afghan air force new aircraft rather than refurbishing older ones.

“The solution is definitely to have reliable new aircraft from the beginning,” he said. “In the long run, I think the cost would be much cheaper.”