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BY THE NUMBERS

\$1.35 million



Amount the French Army paid to lease a Schiebel S-100 Camcopter drone from March to July for testing. *Page 6*

France Tests Helo UAV To Shape Requirements

By PIERRE TRAN

PARIS — The French Army is to begin trials this month with a leased Schiebel S-100 Camcopter as part of efforts to draft requirements for a new tactical drone to replace the Sperwer in use in the Afghan theater, Army Col. Jean-Baptiste de Fontenilles said.

The French Army, Navy and engineers from the Direction Générale pour l'Armement (DGA) procurement office will hold a series of tests of the vertical-takeoff-and-landing S-100, said de Fontenilles, who is in charge of intelligence assets in STAT, the Army's technical department.

"The tests will help the Army work out its ideas for new requirements for a new tactical UAV," de Fontenilles said.

Budgets are tightening, and political will is rising to cooperate with Britain on UAVs.

The lease on the S-100 drone runs from March to July and costs some 1 million euros (\$1.35 million), a DGA spokesman said. The trials are to be held at the Canjuers and Sissonne bases, he said.

Sissonne, in the east of France, is the Army's urban combat training center. The service also has a base at Mourmelon, which has a zone reserved for UAV flights.

The Navy has a requirement for a tactical UAV under a program dubbed *Système de Drone Aérien de la Marine (SDAM)*, the DGA spokesman said.

Defense Minister Hervé Morin had called for a UAV procurement strategy to be delivered by last April, but it was delayed to include lessons from the Afghan deployments of the Sperwer and the *Système Intérimaire de Drone MALE* (medium-altitude, long-endurance), dubbed Harfang. The French Air Force operates the EADS Harfang, which is based on the Eagle 1 from Israel Aerospace Industries.

The French Army has asked U.S. officials to take part in a tactical UAV conference to be held in May, briefing on the American concept of operations and field experience, an official familiar with the event said.

As it writes the new specification, the Army will draw on experience in Afghanistan of fly-

ing the *Système de Drone Tactique Intérimaire (SDTI) Sperwer* from Sagem.

"We're flying a lot," de Fontenilles said. The equipment is seen as an essential part of joint operations.

"There is an importance and interest in the system that goes to the highest levels," he said.

One of the lessons is that drones are vital for intelligence gathering, an industry executive said. The UAV has previously been mainly used as an artillery tool in the French Army doctrine, rather than for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance.

A replacement is needed because the SDTI Sperwer was intended as an interim solution, not meant for deployment in a foreign theater, de Fontenilles said.

Member of Parliament Jean-Claude Viollet said the experience of Afghanistan showed the tactical drone is "indispensable." He and Yves Vanderwalle co-wrote a recent parliamentary report on UAVs.

The harsh terrain and severe climate, however, have taken a high toll on equipment.

France last year bought six Sperwer air vehicles secondhand from Canada to boost its SDTI fleet, which deployed in October 2008 in Afghanistan. The first of the ex-Canadian Army air vehicles flew in mid-November under French colors.

Adm. Christophe Prazuck, spokesman for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said Feb. 18 the Army has flown the SDTI on 240 missions, totaling 530 flight hours, averaging three missions a week, each mission lasting about 2.5 hours. The parliamentary report on UAVs published in December pointed to a high attrition rate, with seven French Sperwers damaged of the initial 18 air vehicles bought. The electro-optronic and infrared camera payload housed in the bubble proved to be vulnerable in landings despite the airbag cushion in its fuselage.

Availability of the SDTI has improved since the summer. "There is now no problem with the Sperwer," de Fontenilles said.

Budget Concerns

An expected tightening in defense spending



AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE PHOTO

Mission Accomplished: A French Sperwer UAV lands at a French forward military base in Afghanistan after an observation mission. The Army is seeking a new tactical drone to replace the Sperwer.

is seen as putting pressure on a merging of tactical and MALE drones, said Viollet.

That pressure includes pushing the French Army to adopt the Watchkeeper drone being bought by the British Army. But Watchkeeper is an upper-level tactical UAV, while French officers want a lower-level air vehicle, one source said.

Chief of the Defense Staff Army Gen. Jean-Louis Georgelin on Feb. 9 told a parliamentary defense committee hearing that Afghanistan showed tactical and MALE missions were distinct but complementary.

"The [*Système Intérimaire de Drone MALE*] and the SDTI are effectively two different

types of equipment," Georgelin said. "The Afghan experience shows us the use of drones by infantry units should be sufficiently intuitive that the section chief or the company commander should be able to use the data in real time."

"We won't have on the ground units which aren't equipped with tactical drones," he said.

As the defense budget changes to meet circumstances, spending on drones will be revisited, Georgelin said. Any revised funding will mean cuts in other programs, he warned.

"Unable as I am to deliver precise figures — I don't have them — I can confirm the interest there is in having two types of drones," he said.

Viollet said a memorandum of understanding signed Feb. 18 by British and French procurement chiefs for cooperation in urgent operational requirements and bilateral talks between London and Paris on collaboration in UAVs were important factors.

An industrial alliance on UAVs including BAE Systems, Dassault Aviation, Thales and others could help maintain a European capability for the next generation of combat aircraft, he said.

The DGA official said the S-100 had been selected for the tests because it was mature, off the shelf and already in operation.

The S-100 would be equipped with a Thales Agile 2 payload, a gyro-stabilized infrared camera with laser range finder.

The 61st Artillery regiment operates the UAV fleet and flew the CL 289 drone in Chad.

Once the Army has drawn up operational requirements for the new tactical drone, they will be sent to the Joint Chiefs of Staff for approval. ■

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