

Aero Vodochody secures L-159 launch customer

AERO VODOCHODY HAS finally secured a launch order for its L-159 light-attack aircraft, with the Czech Government committing to purchasing 72 aircraft for its air force.

The Government gave the go-ahead for production on 11 April following the conclusion of a development agreement, says Aero Vodochody vice-president for research and development, Viktor Kucera.

The defence ministry is to cover about 25% of the cost of developing the aircraft. The rest will come from the Czech banks, which are Aero Vodochody's principal shareholders, and the foreign companies participating in the programme.

The foreign companies with a financial stake in the programme include Rockwell International, the principal avionics partner, and AlliedSignal/TTEC, which is providing the 28kN (6,300lb)-thrust F124-GA-100 power plant.

The cost of the development of the single-seat version of the aircraft is estimated to be Ckr1.4 billion (\$52 million). The aircraft are expected to sell for about \$6 million each.

About 10% of the initial production will be two-seat versions to be used as lead-in trainers with operational capability. Deliveries to the Czech air force are to begin in 1998, and the company is also hoping to export the aircraft. □

Israel will stretch ballistic missile

ISRAEL HAS begun work on an extended-range variant of its Jericho 2 intermediate-range ballistic missile.

The Jericho 2 as now configured has a range of 1,500km (800nm), but it is now understood that a further range improvement is being worked on to give it a 2,000km-plus capability. The Jericho is the basis of the Shavit launch vehicle used this month to launch the Ofeq 3 satellite. □

FLA partners grapple to meet May deadline

DOUGLAS BARRIE/LONDON

THE EUROFLAG Future Large Aircraft (FLA) management agency will be wound up in May, but the partner nations and Airbus Industrie are struggling to have a replacement industrial organisation ready in time to meet this target date.

Establishing the FLA programme under the auspices of Airbus is viewed as critical by several of the participating nations and is one of the key criteria in a UK decision to rejoin the programme.

Senior sources, however, indicate that negotiations between the major FLA and Airbus industrial partners are proving more difficult than expected. The result may be that the May target date is not met.

Sources claim that there is a divergence of opinion between the French and German Airbus

partners over how the FLA programme should be structured.

Daimler Benz Aerospace Airbus says only that, as far as the FLA and Airbus are concerned, the aim is still to make the decision in May.

An appropriate legal structure for Italian participation, since it is not a partner in Airbus, also needs to be established.

Airbus is understandably not keen to take on an "unknown quantity" when the Airbus Industry Military Aircraft company is established.

Sources close to the programme stress that the industrial partners are determined that the management structure be set up effectively.

A quick and successful move to put the programme on a commercial footing is being viewed, at least by the UK Ministry of Defence (MoD), as a litmus test for the programme's future.

In aiming to rejoin the programme, which it left at the end

of the 1980s, the UK MoD wants to see it run on a commercial footing to keep costs down.

The configuration of the FLA aircraft is also due to be completed by May and submitted to the participating nations. Some senior UK officials have expressed concern that the programme may be moving in the wrong direction.

The FLA's cabin height has already been reduced, from 4m to 3.85m, and there are indications of pressure for this to be shrunk further.

Sources also suggest that, in an effort to keep costs down, a reduction in the aircraft's cruise speed is being suggested in some quarters.

UK sources point out that this is taking the FLA toward the Lockheed C-130J Hercules 2 in terms of performance and lift capacity, rather than placing the aircraft clearly between the C-130J and the much larger McDonnell Douglas C-17 Globemaster III. □



ARIA shows first Tu-204

AEROFLOT RUSSIAN INTERNATIONAL AIRLINES (ARIA) received its first Tupolev Tu-204 at Moscow Sheremetyevo Airport on 7 April. The aircraft, RA64010, is the first of four 204C cargo variants to be produced this year and was delivered in a new ARIA livery under consideration for the carrier's entire fleet. Two of the remaining 204Cs this year will go to Oriel Avia, which has an agreement with ARIA to serve the latter's cargo network jointly.

United overhauls fleet expansion

UNITED AIRLINES IS revamping its fleet plan in a move which will reduce the rate at which capacity is added, but will bring down the average fleet age faster than expected.

The carrier's latest five-year plan includes the replacement of 94 in-service aircraft with Boeing 777s and Airbus A320s.

Although it reduces the previously planned growth, the new plan will yield a net increase of 19 younger aircraft by 2000. The previous plan, which would have added a net 48 aircraft by 1997, had unnerved some investors.

The additional A320s and 777s will take the place of Boeing 737-200s, 747-100s and McDonnell Douglas DC-10-10s. □