

France urged to delay Rafale

THE INITIAL version of the Dassault Rafale fighter should be abandoned in favour of an advanced variant to be deployed a decade later than originally planned, according to French air force chief of staff, Gen Jean Rannou.

With the defence budget under extreme pressure, Rannou has told the National Assembly's defence committee that the initial variant of the Rafale (the SU1) due for delivery in 2000, should be dropped.

He advocates purchasing more Dassault Mirage 2000-5s and Mirage 2000Ds while pursuing development of an advanced variant of the Rafale, the SU2 enter service by 2010.

Another option floated by Henri Conze, head of the defence ministry's procurement agency, is to stick with the SU1 Rafale variant, and delay the advanced variant until 2020.

The French navy will still receive its first Rafales by 2000. □

Snecma casts doubt on its GE90 commitment

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CASH-STRAPPED Snecma is understood to be preparing to renegotiate its position on the General Electric GE90, to avoid further heavy spending on developing higher-thrust versions.

Snecma, which is a 25.5% revenue-sharing partner on the GE90, has not denied reports that it is looking to reduce spending on the programme, but declines to comment on the likely outcome of any discussions.

GE will only confirm that Snecma continues to be a revenue-sharing participant in the GE90.

First tests on the 410kN (92,000lb)-thrust GE90B, which will power the B-Market version of the Boeing 777, are due to start "within a matter of days" at Peebles, Ohio, test centre. The

GE90B should be ready for certification early in 1996.

GE says that around 80% of the certification requirements for the engine have already been met during testing of the initial GE90.

Two future growth versions are expected to take thrusts up to around 430kN and 470kN respectively, although these have yet to be launched.

Although Snecma recently received Fr2 billion (\$407 million) credit from its owner, the French Government, the group remains short of funds and is expected to concentrate resources on new-engine launches from the CFM International joint venture with GE. Current plans are to develop the 190kN CFMXX to power a stretched Airbus A340.

Under new chairman Bernard Dufour, Snecma has embarked on a savage restructuring drive to cut

costs and strip the group back to its core aircraft-engines business.

The extent of Snecma's financial problems was again underlined on 12 October, as the group revealed losses topping Fr500 million over the first half of the year.

Rocket-motor builder Société Européenne de Propulsion (SEP) is the latest of the group's many subsidiaries to be put up for sale. Snecma wants to sell its interest in the company to Aerospatiale.

Dufour is still waiting for Government approval over a proposed merger of the group's Messier-Bugatti aircraft-brakes business with BFGoodrich in the USA.

As part of the cost-cutting drive, which will cause 500 job losses by the end of 1995, Dufour plans to move the group's headquarters to the main production site at Melun-Villaroche. □

Regional traffic leads European airline growth

EUROPEAN regional passenger traffic grew by 15% in the first half of 1995, says European Regional Airlines (ERA) director-general Mike Ambrose at the association's annual convention at Baveno, Italy, on 12-13 October.

The convention itself attracted 35 airlines and 30 companies, reflecting the ERA's contention that regional aviation is the fastest-growing European airline sector.

The number of aircraft with fewer than 39 seats has been decreasing steadily. Ambrose says that one of the reasons for this is the European system of levying user charges which penalise smaller aircraft more than larger types.

The proportion of direct operating costs accounted for by user charges is at least twice as high as for the majors, he says, "...and seems to be increasing. Governments have

been very keen for us to stand on our own feet, but are apparently not so keen to make their own organisations more efficient".

The ERA appears to have had some success in convincing the European Joint Airworthiness Authorities (JAA) that the forthcoming flight-time limitation rules should be amended to take into account the different operating conditions for regionals. "Our pilots have stable schedules," says Ambrose. "They have no dietary or time changes, because they operate in normal hours, like anybody else." He says that the JAA has shown "some sympathy" for the ERA position. "If we had to follow the current rules our airlines would have to increase their flight crew by up to 20%, putting some of them out of business". □



Beluga gets Toulouse test run

IN THE RUN-UP TO Daimler-Benz Aerospace's delivery to Airbus Industrie of its first heavy-lift Airbus A300-600ST, the aircraft has been used for a demonstration flight carrying two A340 wing ship-sets from Bremen, northern Germany, to Toulouse in southern France. The Beluga has been built by the Daimler-Benz Aerospace/Aerospatiale venture SATIC. The flight, carried out on 9 October, involved the aircraft carrying a load near to its maximum capacity of 45.5t. Four of the aircraft are being built to transport assemblies between the various Airbus consortium factories.