

Malaysia reconsiders Rooivalk as Singapore seeks Apaches

MALAYSIA IS indicating that it might revise an earlier decision to postpone ordering the Denel CSH-2 Rooivalk, as neighbouring Singapore moves towards finalising its own attack-helicopter selection by mid-1998.

According to senior defence sources in Malaysia, the Government is once again showing interest in the South African helicopter after earlier deciding to shelve the programme until 1999/2000.

"We are confident that the decision will come earlier than people had anticipated," suggests a defence official.

Malaysia had originally been expected to conclude a deal for an initial eight Rooivalks with Denel by the end of the 1997. The Government, however, recently announced that the programme, as well as a planned search-and-rescue replacement for the air force's Sikorsky S-61 Nuri, is to be deferred in the face of a major financial crisis.

Denel views Malaysia as its strongest prospective export customer for the tandem-seat machine. The company is eager to cement a deal to bolster its earlier sale of 12 Rooivalks to the South



Denel's Rooivalk may make an early export debut after all

African Air Force, and the manufacturer has been offering Malaysia co-production concessions.

Singapore, in the meantime, is expected to be the first Asian country to ask the US Government for release of the Boeing AH-64D Longbow Apache. Officials suggest that such a request would be looked upon favourably, given the island nation's strong defence relationship with the USA.

The Republic of Singapore Air Force is scheduled to conduct a week-long in-country evaluation of the AH-64 shortly. The service is also looking at the competing

Eurocopter Tiger, Mil Mi-28 Havoc and the Rooivalk, but no final decision has yet been taken. The air force requires a total of 30 machines.

As part of any deal, Singapore is believed to be asking for a comprehensive training and logistical-support package, including access to overseas bases for pilot instruction. Singapore already maintains long-term detachments of Boeing CH-47D Chinooks and Lockheed Martin F-16 fighter aircraft in the USA, and is expected to seek similar arrangements for its planned attack helicopters. □

NEWS IN BRIEF

■ BELL ASSEMBLY

The Philippines has signed a memorandum of understanding with Bell Helicopter Textron to assemble the twin-engined 412 and smaller 206 at a planned new site in Alaminos. Bell is stressing that the deal depends on the two types being ordered in sufficient numbers.

■ MALAYSIA LEASEBACK

Malaysia Airlines has concluded a sale and leaseback agreement with General Electric Capital for six of its Boeing 737-500s. The airline has also signed an agreement to purchase a Boeing Business Jet, making it the first Asian customer for the corporate version of the 737.

■ SLOW DASH

Pelangi Air has put on indefinite hold the delivery of three completed Bombardier de Havilland Dash 8-300s until operational and shareholding issues are resolved. The 50-seat turboprops, ordered in 1995, had been due for delivery in June and July, but have been delayed by Malaysia Airline moves to acquire a controlling 70% stake in the carrier.

Currency crisis delays Saeaga's launch plans and A320 purchase

MALAYSIA'S SAEAGA Airlines is postponing plans to order new Airbus Industrie A320s, and the launch of its first scheduled international services, in the face of the recent Asian currency crisis and economic downturn.

"We're looking to buy five A320s, but this has now been deferred," says Ting Pek Khiing, chief executive of Saeaga parent company Ekran Berhad. "Once the economy stabilises, we can go forward in a big way, but we're now looking at an economic turmoil and a slowdown," he adds.

The airline has already signed a two-year lease agreement with Singapore Aircraft Leasing Enterprise for two International Aero

Engine V2500-powered A320s and will take delivery of the aircraft in August and September 1998. As an alternative to purchasing its own A320s, Ting suggests that Saeaga might lease additional aircraft in the interim.

Saeaga has also been forced to put on hold plans to launch international services. The carrier had been considering a variety of different regional destinations, including Beijing, Guangzhou, Kunming Shanghai, Shenzhen and Xiamen in mainland China; Hong Kong; Manila in the Philippines; Manado in Indonesia; and Taipei.

"We're now going to concentrate on domestic services, such as from East Malaysia to Kuala

Lumpur and Langkawi. Before we inaugurate regional services to neighbouring countries, we must first see an improvement in the economy," explains Ting.

The airline's fleet of two Bombardier de Havilland Dash 8-200/300s and a single Canadair RJ are used to operate a limited scheduled service within East Malaysia, connecting Bintulu, Kota Kinabalu, Kuching, Layang-Layang, Miri, Mulu, and Sibul. The two-year-old carrier also flies charters to the Philippines.

With the delivery of the two leased A320s, Saeaga plans to expand services beyond the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak to West Malaysia. New

managing director David Chew estimates that, with two narrow-body jet airliners, Saeaga will be capable of operating up to three round trips a day to Kuala Lumpur and Langkawi.

Saeaga also wants to enter into an interline agreement with major international carriers operating into Malaysia. The carrier has opened talks with British Airways, China Airlines of Taiwan, Germany's Lufthansa and flag carrier Malaysia Airlines.

Meanwhile, Malaysia's other start-up carrier, AirAsia, is negotiating with Airbus to secure two leased used A310-300s for new longer-haul services to the Middle East and Japan. □