

NEWS IN BRIEF

■ TURKISH UPGRADE

Turkey has selected a consortium of Elbit, Israel Aircraft Industries and Singapore Aerospace to upgrade 48 Northrop F-5s.

■ KOREAN DOWNTURN

Asiana Airlines and Korean Air are cutting over 20 international passenger and cargo services and reducing frequencies on a number of domestic and international routes. South Korea's worsening financial woes have also resulted in Air New Zealand and Qantas stopping services to Seoul.

■ EMBRAER ORDERS

Trans States Airlines has firm orders for seven Embraer RJ145 regional jets and options on a further 18, an application by the airline for slot exemptions at Chicago's O'Hare Airport has revealed. The St Louis-based carrier wants to serve three Appalachian region cities from Chicago. First delivery of the aircraft would be in April. Meanwhile, Portugalia is increasing RJ145 orders from four to six. It also holds two options.

■ MALEV SALE

Hungarian banks OTP and MKB have stepped in to acquire Alitalia's 30% stake in Malev for \$65 million, the sale was a condition of European Commission approval of the Italian airlines recent state-aid injection.

Sikorsky may accelerate S-92

GRAHAM WARWICK/STRATFORD

SIKORSKY IS coming under increasing pressure from potential customers to launch production of its private-venture S-92 medium helicopter. The current plan calls for a production decision after the first flight, scheduled for September, but increasing interest in the aircraft could lead to a decision early in 1998, allowing deliveries to begin in 2001.

The S-92 programme was launched in 1995 as a five-aircraft development effort involving Sikorsky and risk-sharing partners Aero Industrial Development (Taiwan), Embraer (Brazil), Gamaesa (Spain), Jingdezhen Helicopter Group (China) and Mitsubishi Heavy Industries (Japan). Assembly of the first two airframes at Sikorsky is well advanced.

Although formal marketing has not begun, an unsolicited offer of the larger S-92 was presented as part of Sikorsky's H-60-based Maplehawk bid for Canada's search-and-rescue (SAR) helicopter contract. Portugal has a similar requirement and has been



The S-92 ground-test vehicle (foreground) will be ready in March

supplied with information on the S-92, says programme vice-president Kenneth Kelly. Denmark has already expressed a preference for the S-92 to replace its Sikorsky S-61 SAR helicopters, he says.

Sikorsky has provided S-92 briefings to the US Marine Corps squadron, which operates the US Presidential-transport S-61s; to the US Coast Guard, which is drawing up its long-range fleet

plan and to the US Air Force, for possible special-forces use on long-range combat-SAR missions.

Kelly says that the US Army has been briefed on S-92 improvements which could be used to upgrade its UH-60 Black Hawks. These include more-powerful General Electric CT7-8 turbo-shafts, uprated transmissions and all-composite rotor blades. Together, these would give the UH-60 a true 4,500kg hot-and-high lift capability, he says.

The S-92 is being developed as a commercial 19-passenger helicopter, as well as a military utility-transport, and there is increasing interest in the aircraft from North Sea offshore-support operators, Kelly says. Together, these emerging requirements are increasing pressure on Sikorsky to accelerate a production decision, he believes.

The first S-92, the ground-test article, is scheduled to be delivered to Sikorsky's West Palm Beach, Florida, flight-test centre in March. The following four aircraft will be used for flight testing, and commercial type-certification is planned for mid-2000. □

Economic crisis delays Thailand F/A-18 purchase

THAILAND PLANS TO delay its purchase of eight Boeing F/A-18C/Ds by three years because of the country's economic crisis. A team from the Royal Thai Air Force plans to visit Boeing in mid-January in a bid to re-negotiate the \$392 million contract, signed in 1996, which now calls for delivery by 2000. Thailand wants to delay delivery to 2003.

The country's currency has lost

45% of its value against the US dollar since July 1997, effectively doubling the cost of the aircraft and forcing the air force to examine three options: cancelling the contract; selling the aircraft to a third country; and delaying delivery.

Air force commander-in-chief ACM Thananit Naimchin is reported as saying that cancellation would incur a termination penalty of \$250 million, while no potential

buyers for the aircraft have been identified. This leaves delaying delivery as the only option.

Thailand wants to delay delivery so as to spread payments. The air force has paid almost \$75 million so far, and is scheduled to pay \$93 million in 1998, but is reportedly seeking to reduce that to \$40 million.

Production of the aircraft has begun and they are due for hand-over to the US Navy in 1999. □

Charter airlines sign up A330-200s to use on long-haul services

THREE LONG-haul charter airlines will introduce the Airbus A330-200 in 1999 and 2000, including UK carriers Airtours International and Leisure International Airways (LIA), and Air Transat of Canada.

Airtours, which selected the A330-200 some time ago to supplement its Boeing 767-300ERs on long-haul charters (*Flight Inter-*

national, 24 December, 1997-6 January, P8) has concluded a deal to lease two Rolls-Royce Trent 772-powered A330-200s from International Lease Finance (ILFC), for delivery in April and June 1999. The aircraft will be flown on routes from the UK to Asia, Australia, the Caribbean, Mexico and the USA.

LIA, which, like Airtours, uses the 767 on its long-haul network,

will take delivery of two 380-seat, Pratt & Whitney PW4168A-powered A330-200s in the first quarter of 2000. These will replace the smaller 767s on services to the Caribbean and the USA.

The airline says that the 767s - which are leased by LIA's parent, Unijet, from ILFC - will be returned to the lessor when the A330s are delivered. LIA says that

the A330s will be ordered directly from Airbus.

Canada's Air Transat, based in Montreal, has concluded a deal with ILFC for two Trent 772-powered A330-200s to be taken on five-year leases from February and April 1999. The aircraft, to be configured with 362 seats, will supplement and eventually replace the airline's Lockheed L-1011s. □