

Flightlease and GATX strike SAA deal

ANDREW DOYLE/MUNICH

SAIRGROUP leasing subsidiary Flightlease and GATX of the USA are to supply the bulk of the 21 Boeing 737-800s being acquired by South African Airways (SAA) to replace its Airbus A320s, A300s and Boeing 767s on medium-haul routes.

The decision by SAA in favour of the Next Generation 737 follows a fierce battle between Boeing, Airbus – offering its A320 family – and several leading leasing companies.

SAA chief executive Coleman Andrews says the airline secured “highly attractive purchase prices and support packages which... equal or better those obtained by substantially larger airlines”.

The South African flag carrier, 20%-owned by SAirGroup, will become the first airline to operate the 737-800 with blended winglets when it begins taking delivery of the 157-seat twinjets at the rate of one a month from May.

Flightlease chief executive Hans Jörg Hunziker says the Swiss company expects to finalise a block

order for 23 737-800s with Boeing during the next few weeks. Five of these will be purchased directly by SAA, it is understood, in exchange for the two remaining deferred 777 orders the airline holds.

Eight will be leased to SAA by Flightlease, while the remaining 10 will be acquired by the GATX Flightlease joint-venture company for placement with other customers. Another eight 737-800s will be leased to SAA separately by GATX from an existing order.

As part of the deal, GATX Flightlease has agreed to buy back

SAA's seven A320s, while Boeing and CFMI have agreed to take its three Boeing 767s and eight A300s.

The 737-800s will be operated by SAA alongside its 737-200s by a single pool of pilots on domestic routes, and to international destinations in southern, west and east Africa. The airline hold options on a further 20 737s.

Hunziker says that, later this year, Flightlease will assist SAA in launching a study into its long-haul fleet strategy, with the objective of reducing the number of 747 variants in operation. □

MiG flies 1.44 demonstrator

AFTER NUMEROUS false starts, the RSK MiG 1.44 fifth-generation fighter technology demonstrator made its first flight on 29 February. The flight, from the LII Gromov Flight Research Institute at Zhukovsky, near Moscow, lasted 18min.

The MiG 1.44 climbed to 3,300ft (1,000m) and twice circled Zhukovsky with the undercarriage down at a speed of 270-325kt (500-600km/h) before landing. The first flight was planned for March 1999.

RSK MiG chief test pilot Vladimir Gorbunov says: “We all have been waiting for this flight for so long, but it went through as an everyday event. The machine behaved well, but it is obvious by its handling qualities that it is a fundamentally new aircraft. So all the work lies ahead.”

Design bureau Mikoyan Engineering Centre became part of RSK when MAPO was re-organised late last year. RSK is paying for and performing the flight tests.

While the MiG 1.44 is not considered a prototype for the Russian air force's next-generation fighter, RSK believes the programme is crucial for the development of Russian fighters. Key 1.44 technologies are super-cruise, reduced infrared, radar and visual signatures and thrust vectoring for control at high angles of attack. □

UK MoD brings forward meeting to decide on key RAF competitions

STEWART PENNEY/LONDON

THE KEY government committee meeting destined to decide the outcome of three critical UK Royal Air Force competitions – Beyond Visual Range Air-to-Air Missile (BVRAAM), Short Term Tactical Airlifter (STSA) and Future Tactical Airlifter (FTA) – has been moved forward a week to 8 March.

Industry sources say the Defence and Overseas Policy committee, consisting of the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, Chancellor, Foreign Secretary, Secretary for Trade and Industry and Minister of Defence, is to meet earlier than expected to allow decisions ahead of a European Union summit at the end of this month.

The competitions have been subject to enormous political pressure as Europe has sought to launch new programmes on the back of arguments for technology independence from the USA, while the USA has offered the cash-strapped UK Ministry of Defence the prospect of low-cost, low-risk solutions.

The sources say the MoD's Equipment Approvals Committee (EAC) – which met last month – is recommending US options for the



The RAF is likely to get C-17s in the short term, but the A400M later

short term, with longer-term commitments, including funding, to European solutions. EAC recommendations are, however, “one player indicating their preference – there are four others in the game,” says a source.

The BVRAAM competition is a fight between a Matra BAe Dynamics (MBD)-led team offering the Meteor and a Raytheon bid based on an upgraded AIM-120 AMRAAM linked to an offer from the US Government for future UK/US air-to-air missile development. Industry sources suggest Meteor will be favoured in the long run, but Raytheon could also get a reduced order.

The RAF has ordered the standard AMRAAM for use on its Eurofighters from 2002. The

BVRAAM requirement demands delivery of the new missile in 2008 – a timescale few observers believe Meteor can meet, despite private guarantees given by MBD.

On the aircraft front, Boeing is offering the C-17 Globemaster with Air Foyle and the Antonov An-124 as the STSA rival, while the C-17 is also fighting for an FTA win, this time against the Airbus Military Company's A400M.

Sources suggest the EAC has recommended a short-term purchase of three C-17s and a commitment to the A400M, with the proviso that the programme moves forward. If not, the C-17s will be retained.

The MoD says it continues to expect decisions in the first quarter of this year. □