

PROCUREMENT RAMON LOPEZ / WASHINGTON DC

USAF invites proposal for BC-17X

Air force transports could be operated as civilian freighters during peacetime if US proposal comes to fruition

The US Air Force is pushing ahead with plans for a novel public/private acquisition strategy for the proposed Boeing BC-17X which would be operated by civil cargo carriers during peacetime.

A draft invitation to propose (ITP), which was to be issued on 27 July, outlines how the scheme would work. A final ITP is expected to follow in September, and the USAF hopes to have a contract by next February.

Boeing and the USAF believe there is a market for at least 10 civil variants of the C-17 over the next decade. They hope that support from the commercial cargo marketplace will sustain current production rates beyond 2006,

when the last of the USAF's 137 C-17s are delivered.

Last December, the USAF issued a request for information to gauge interest from the freighter industry. In February, more than 35 interested parties attended an industry day at Boeing's Long Beach facility to discuss the aircraft's potential commercial uses.

Talks continue with between 10 and 12 entities, including cargo carriers, financial institutions and freight forwarders, which are forming partnerships to acquire the 10 BC-17Xs, says Col Gregory Lockhart, the USAF's deputy for airlift acquisitions. He says World Airways is assembling a strategic alliance to make a bid. "They are

ready to go on this particular effort," says Lockhart.

It is expected that all 10 BC-17Xs would go to one US cargo carrier. Foreign cargo operators are barred from the competition since the deal requires "a lifetime commitment of the aircraft to the USAF's Civil Reserve Air Fleet [CRAF] programme and immediate availability", says Lockhart. The USAF hopes the aircraft can also be claimed for short-notice, short-term missions.

Each civil C-17 will cost \$152 million and the USAF is willing to contribute about \$300 million towards the purchase of 10 BC-17Xs. It will also pay an annual fee for CRAF-related costs. Boeing hopes that a combination of

BC-17Xs and a follow-on multi-year purchase of up to 50 more C-17s will sustain production until at least 2008. The programme requires approval from the Department of Defense and the US Congress.

Lockhart says the BC-17X, which will be about 92% common with the military C-17, will be able to deliver outsized cargo to unimproved 1,800m (6,000ft) airfields. He favours the concept "since the USAF will gain access to C-17s it does not need every day of the year for peacetime airlift.

"On a day-to-day basis, the BC-17 will earn money doing other things. The USAF will get them, as required, without bearing the cost of ownership."



AVIONICS UPGRADE

Turkey offered C-130 package

The Lahav division of Israel Aircraft Industries is offering Turkey a modular, low-cost avionics modernisation package for eight Lockheed Martin C-130Es it plans to upgrade. The package, which is applicable to the Hercules and other tactical transports, consists of a mission computer, colour multifunction displays and software, developed on the back of experience gained by Israeli air force operations. Orna Ben-Yacov, deputy director of avionics engineering in the Lahav division, says the price of the avionics package is about \$4 million, depending on the specifications. The package is designed to allow C-130s to better perform tactical missions and to meet global air traffic management requirements.

TRAINING

Czechs to establish NATO air academy

The Czech defence ministry is planning to create an international military air academy for NATO countries and associate NATO Partnership for Peace nations. The first students could join in 2003.

Prague requires a new training school for its own pilots and believes that this can be made to pay for itself by opening the school to other countries.

Initial training will consist of 100h on the Zlin 142 light aircraft, followed by instruction on advanced trainers.

Fighter pilots will progress to a 150h course on the Aero Vodochody L-39 Albatros, followed by 200h on the Aero L-159. Transport pilots will continue their training by flying Let L-410s, while rotary-wing pilots will transfer to the Mil Mi-2 Hoplite.

The Czech air force requires around 30 pilots a year and so has excess capacity for third nations.

Two locations are being considered for the training school, Hradec Kralove and Pardubice. Although

the defence ministry is believed to favour the former, dividing the school between the two locations is a possibility.

Pardubice's suitability could be compromised as it is home to the Czech air force's transport wing, limiting the airfield's capacity for training flights.

Five countries are understood to have expressed an interest in the scheme including the neighbouring Slovak Republic and Hungary, which gave up its own preliminary training several years ago.

The Czech project is similar to the scheme considered by Poland, where the Deblin Air Academy has the capacity to cover a full training syllabus, including live firing on air-to-air as well as air-to-ground ranges. Deblin's weather is considered to be among the best in northern Europe for flying.

The Poles, however, have done little to develop and promote their idea, while Prague appears to have pushed ahead with a workable scheme.