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AIR TRANSPORT

FLEET PROCUREMENT DAVID FULLBROOK / SINGAPORE

Vietnam Airlines goes on aircraft spending spree

A government handout of \$1bn funds ambitious expansion plans in South-East Asia

Vietnam Airlines has signed a letter of intent (LOI) for the purchase of five Airbus A320 family aircraft as part of rapid expansion plans to meet rising tourist traffic. The carrier is already in advanced talks with Boeing to acquire 777s.

The South-East Asian carrier favours A321s in this latest Airbus deal but may order a mix of aircraft including A319s. "It's not confirmed but they will probably be A321s," says the airline. "We don't have a decision about the engines." The competition is between the CFM International CF56 and International Aero Engines V2500.

If a deal is signed, Vietnam Airlines wants delivery of the aircraft to begin in 2003, ending in late 2004 or 2005. Discussions to close the deal should begin in early October and be wrapped up in a few months, says the carrier. Vietnam Airlines indicated in June it intended to purchase its first A320s, which will be used on domestic and regional routes. A320 family aircraft have all been leased until now.

Contracts were also signed for Air France Industries to train, in France, around 20 pilots for



Vietnam Airlines' fleet could grow to 34 aircraft by 2010

Vietnam Airlines' 10 leased A320s and two A321s, and more maintenance engineers to perform C checks. Vietnam is using \$3 million of development loans from the French Government to pay for the training.

Meanwhile, discussions continue with Boeing over the terms of a deal to supply four 777-200ERs for delivery beginning in late 2002.

"Right now we are trying to complete the contract with Boeing...it should be signed before the end of the year," says

the airline. An LOI was signed during former US President Bill Clinton's visit in November 2000. Vietnam Airlines already operates 767-300ERs.

The carrier received government approval in May to spend around \$1 billion on new aircraft until 2005, bringing the fleet to 18 aircraft, and another \$1 billion until 2010 to expand to 34 aircraft.

New routes to Beijing and Kunming are on course to open on 28 September and the end of October respectively.

AIRCRAFT DEVELOPMENT

Longer Range 747-400 shapes up

Almost two-thirds of the design for the Longer Range Boeing 747-400 has been released to engineering in the run up to the start of final assembly of the first aircraft for Australian flag carrier Qantas, which is due to begin in February 2002.

Boeing passed the 63% design release point in late August, and says early long lead sub-assembly work on the reinforced structural elements of the heavier 747 variant is now under way. This includes wider gauge skins, ribs

and spars as well as forgings for the stronger undercarriage required by the aircraft, which will have a maximum take-off weight of 413t.

Tests have also been successfully completed on the auxiliary fuel tank, which has been developed by Marshall of Cambridge in the UK.

The first of six aircraft ordered by Qantas is due to roll out in June 2002 and will begin a short flight test programme the following month. Pending the successful

completion of these tests, first delivery is set for October.

Qantas originally ordered the first two Longer Range -400s for handover in 2002 and the balance over an extended period between 2003 and 2005.

The airline has accelerated deliveries of the new fleet following its recent decision to bring forward the retirement of older 747-200s and 747SPs, and should have them all in service by late 2004 (*Flight International* 28 August-3 September).