

AIRCRAFT DEVELOPMENT VLADIMIR KARNOZOV & PAUL DUFFY / MOSCOW

Atlant Soyuz signs up for Tu-334s

Moscow airline becomes launch carrier for twinjet after posting letter of intent with Tupolev/RSK MiG for two aircraft

Atlant Soyuz Airlines has signed a letter of intent (LoI) with Tupolev and RSK MiG for two Tu-334s, as flight testing of the new twinjet gathers momentum.

The Moscow-based airline, which operates a fleet of around 30 Russian passenger and freighter aircraft, is due to take delivery of its first Tu-334 in 2004 and the second in 2005. According to Vladimir

Kravchuk, Tu-334 project manager at the RSK plant in Moscow, the firm contract is to follow "within a month", and will make Atlant Soyuz the launch customer for the 102-seater.

To date, no firm orders have been placed for the new Tupolev, although Russia's two largest passenger airlines, Aeroflot and Pulkovo, have signed LoIs, with

talks in progress with Russian carrier KVM regarding an order.

The baseline model is equipped with Ichenko Progress D-436 engines, although a Westernised version powered by Rolls-Royce BR715 engines is also planned. The R-R model has been specified by Aeroflot. Kravchuk says the RSK production plant plans to assemble 194 Tu-334s by 2015, to fulfil a

market requirement for the 350 such aircraft forecast by Russia's Rosaviakosmos state agency. The Tu-334 project will break even with the sale of 48 aircraft, Kravchuk says. RSK is planning to complete its first aircraft in July 2003, and make first delivery in 2004.

Rosaviakosmos has invested \$15 million in the programme to fund this year's work. According to Tu-334 chief designer Igor Kalygin, the single flying Tu-334 prototype has completed around 144 flights and 180h since its first flight in February 1999. Russian certification is targeted for the end of next year.

The aircraft is due to start noise-testing at the end of this month, and this should be completed by June. Progress has been made on the test programme, says Kalygin, including the establishment of performance and certain take-off/approach/landing parameters.



MARK WAGNER/FLIGHT INTERNATIONAL

The single Tu-334 prototype has completed 180h of testing, ahead of its planned certification next year

NETWORK EXPANSION CHRISTINA MACKENZIE / CASABLANCA

Royal Air Maroc picks up Air Afrique's West African routes

Royal Air Maroc (RAM) is picking up routes in West Africa from defunct West African carrier Air Afrique as it seeks to develop its Casablanca base into a major hub.

According to RAM's chief executive officer Mohamed Berrada, the airline wants to let passengers "fly to New York or Middle Eastern destinations without having to transit via Paris". Berrada says the move is being undertaken "in co-ordination" with minority shareholder Air France, which has a 3.97% stake. The French flag carrier is also strengthening its West African network, but Berrada denies the two airlines are battling it out in this market. "There is no question of a fight," he says. "We aim to provide a complementary service."

Berrada says from 7 May there will be five Casablanca-New York flights weekly, peaking at daily

flights in the summer with the airline's new Boeing 767-300ERs. "We aim to fill this aircraft in part with passengers from West Africa," he adds.

On 30 March, RAM inaugurated three flights a week from Dakar, Senegal, to Paris via Air Sénégal International, 50% owned by RAM.

Backing its network expansion plans, RAM will introduce 26 new aircraft during the next decade, including 20 Boeing 737-700/800s and its first Airbus - four A321s. "We'd asked for a one-year delay in our delivery schedule after 11 September - but traffic has picked up over the past three months, so we've reviewed the delay and are now respecting the original delivery times," says Berrada.

The airline's two remaining 737-200s will be retired from service at year-end, although one may be

converted to a freighter, RAM says, so that by 2012, the carrier will have a fleet of 52 aircraft.

■ Snecma Morocco Engine Services (SMES), RAM's joint-venture with Snecma Services, handled 60% of engine repairs for African airlines last year, and plans to launch a \$5 million expansion programme. SMES general manager Oliver Savin says: "African airlines represent around 50% of our business." The other half comes mainly from European airlines including CSA Czech Airlines, Jet Airways, Maersk Air, Malev and Transavia.

Savin says SMES's \$5 million investment will develop its capacities for cleaning and non-destructive test processes, "enabling us to maintain and repair engines to depths at which we currently have to send the engines to Europe".

START-UP

Vuelamex tries again

Would-be low-cost start-up carrier Vuelamex is restructuring its launch plans and making a new attempt to gain its operating certificate following its rejection by the Mexican civil aviation authority earlier this year and the loss of its four leased Boeing 717s to AirTran Airways.

The airline had planned to operate up to four 717s on lease from Pembroke Capital, but failed to obtain authority to operate (ATO) from Mexican agencies after questions over its financial security and its connections to failed former Mexican airline TAESA (*Flight International*, 26 March - 1 April).

Boeing says Vuelamex is "expressing continued interest in the 717". The carrier has reorganised its investor structure to avoid the TAESA issues and is thought to be talking to Boeing Aircraft Trading over former American/TWA 717s in storage.