

PARTNERSHIP ANDREW DOYLE / SINGAPORE

China to approve Sikorsky venture

Joint manufacturing project will be first to involve foreign partner and could be producing by year-end

Sikorsky Aircraft and Chinese Shanghai Little Eagle Science and Technology (SLEC) are close to securing Chinese government approval for launch of their light helicopter manufacturing joint venture.

Shanghai Sikorsky Aircraft will be 51% owned by SLEC, with the US manufacturer holding the balance, and will licence-produce the Schweizer 300 three-seat helicopter for the Chinese market. It will be

the first China-based helicopter manufacturing joint venture to involve a foreign partner.

"We have received approval for our feasibility study from the Civil Aviation Administration of China," says Shanghai Sikorsky Aircraft general manager Chris Jaran. He says Beijing could issue a business licence within the next "six-eight weeks", allowing production to begin before the end of the year.

Sikorsky has a licence to distribute Schweizer helicopters in China and several other Asian countries including Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. It has already sold five aircraft to Chinese customers: four two-seat 300CB series trainers to a flying school and a single 300C three-seat high performance version.

Subassemblies for the initial three aircraft arrived in Shanghai on 26 August and the remaining two are scheduled to arrive in Guangzhou in early September, according to Jaran. The first batch is scheduled to be assembled by Schweizer engineers working under the observation of local engineers, before the beginning of in-country assembly.

Jaran says the new joint venture will assemble about 15 Schweizer 300s this year, though initial capacity will be for up to 24 per year. Ultimately a rate of 48 could be reached if demand is sufficient. About 20 two to three-seat helicopters of all models have been delivered to Chinese customers in the past two years.

He describes China as potentially the "world's biggest market" for light helicopters, with demand coming principally from flight schools, government agencies, police bureaux, and forestry and powerline patrol agencies.

Although Shanghai Sikorsky Aircraft will initially assemble helicopters from imported parts, Jaran says the company will gradually take over responsibility for full parts and subassembly production as part of a "phased approach".

Sikorsky hopes participation in the joint venture will help open the door to future sales of its larger S-76 and S-92 helicopters. It recently sold a pair of S-76s to the ministry of communication for search and rescue. Jingdezhen Helicopter Group is a partner in the S-92 programme with responsibility for the tail section.

Plans to form the joint-venture company with SLEC were announced earlier this year (*Flight International*, 12-18 February). The 900kg (2,000lb)-class 300 model is equipped with a single Textron Lycoming HIO-360 piston engine.



Schweizer 300 three-seat helicopters will be assembled under the deal

ORDERS JUSTIN WASTNAGE / BAKU, AZERBAIJAN

Azalhelicopter finalises Eurocopter deal as it discusses Bell 427 order

Baku Azal Helicopter Airline (Azalhelicopter) is finalising a six-helicopter deal with Eurocopter for off-shore oil-worker transport. The state-owned Azerbaijan aviation company is also negotiating with Bell for pipeline patrol aircraft, ahead of major extraction of its oil reserves.

Azalhelicopter started work last week on a new passenger terminal in Zabrat, 18km (12 miles) from Baku, and the company is concluding a deal for two Eurocopter AS332L2 Super Pumas and four EC155B medium twin helicopters for services to Caspian Sea oil installations. Deliveries of the aircraft are likely to start from August 2003.

According to Jahangir Askerov, director general of the Azal group of companies, Azalhelicopter will also need four Bell 427 light twin-turbine helicopters for pipeline patrol duties in the Azerbaijan sector of a new pipeline linking Zabrat with Ceyhan in Turkey.

Azalhelicopter expects to conclude the deal by year-end, with first deliveries starting by the end of next year.

Oil companies will share flights to manned rigs and drilling platforms in the region, which is estimated to have reserves of around three-quarters the level of Saudi Arabia. Several European and North American oil companies are

operating in the Caspian, but the State Oil Company of the Azerbaijan Republic still accounts for 80% of installations.

Azalhelicopter flies Mil Mi-2 and Mi-8 helicopters. Askerov says the 12-seat EC155s will be used to transport workers to installations close to shore, while the Super Pumas will be required for oil rigs further into the Caspian Sea. Most oil-rigs are between 100km and 140km from shore.

According to Askerov, the Zabrat terminal, which has a 600m (2,000ft) runway, will be similar to those at Aberdeen, UK, with safety briefing rooms and customs clearance.

REGULATIONS

Australia retreats on Caravan rule

Australia's Civil Aviation Safety Authority (CASA) has backed away from a draft rule limiting Cessna 208 Caravans to nine passengers in instrument flight rule (IFR) conditions, or over water in approved single-engine turbine-powered aircraft.

The review followed a campaign from Cessna Pacific, the manufacturer's Australian sales and service organisation. CASA says: "The limitation of nine passengers was an oversight. The current requirements were intended to be retained, and up to 12 passengers may be carried, provided the flightcrew consists of two qualified pilots."