India’s continuing efforts to become self-reliant in aerospace were on view at Aero India 98, in Bangalore from 8-12 December, in the shape of projects like the ALH helicopter and Astra missile. But the continued non-appearance of the Light Combat Aircraft three years after it rolled out is evidence that it still has some way to go. Howard Gethin reports

HAL and Airbus sign on A320 freighter

INDIAN AIRLINES is to order six ATR 42-500 turboprop airliners from the Franco-Italian ATR company. The deal also marks the start of a manufacturing cooperation between Hindustan Aeronautics (HAL) and the European aerospace concern.

“Indian Airlines has not conveyed its decision to us, but its board has approved the production contract, which means our financial offer has also been approved,” Luciano Fava, ATR’s vice-president for sales, said at the show. It is not clear whether government approval is still required.

The agreement signed by HAL and ATR is essentially a three-phase partnership leading potentially to joint production. The first stage is expected to involve just the customisation of the aircraft for the local market. HAL has been seeking a turboprop assembly deal for several years without success.

Further orders from carriers such as Indian Airways and possibly privately owned carriers like Jet Airways will be needed to push the figure above 60 aircraft in either the 50-seat ATR 42-500 or ATR72 configuration before a second production line would be considered.

Production work for ATR would largely go to Hindustan Aeronautics’ Kanpur Division, which already builds the Fairchild Dornier 228 under licence.

The deal with the state-owned carrier is expected to be for five firm aircraft and options on a further six.

ATR has a similar deal under way in China, where its subcontract work with local aerospace companies is related to sales of the ATR 42 and 72. The ultimate aim here is to also set up a production line, although slow sales in the country have delayed implementation of assembly work.

The Indian Government has ruled out a merger of Air India and Indian Airways, just days after the joint airline board approved a report by consultants recommending the move. On 7 December, the joint airline board approved the creation of a holding company, of which both airlines would be 100% subsidiaries.

India unveils Astra but keeps wraps on LCA

INDIA’S DEFENCE Research Development Organisation has unveiled the Astra long-range active radar guided missile. The research organisation claims the weapon could be test fired for the first time next year.

The 3.8m (12.4ft)-long weapon weighs 148kg (325lb), including a 13kg prefragmented warhead triggered by a radio frequency proximity fuse. The missile use inertial midcourse guidance updates, with terminal homing by active radar seeker. The weapon is similar in appearance to a stretched Matra 530 with four long cruciform short-chor wings and four small tail fins close behind.

The missile body is 178mm in diameter in the rear section, narrowing to 160mm just ahead of the wings. The Indians say 85% of the technology was derived locally.

The weapon is destined to be carried by the locally developed Light Combat Aircraft (LCA), which despite being rolled out three years ago has still not made its maiden flight and was not displayed at the Aero India show.

The latest schedule being offered for the first flight of the LCA is 1999. The first aircraft is said to be destined for a mid-year maiden flight with a second aircraft joining the test programme later in the year.

The Indian Government claims that the sanctions imposed on India by the US Administration in the wake of the nuclear weapon tests conducted earlier this year have had only marginal affect. Lockheed Martin was helping iron out problems on the flight control before Indian engineers were ordered to leave the US company, while General Electric is supplying engines for the prototype as India develops its own Kaveri engine for production versions.

Production is due to start in 2003, although based on the speed of progress to date this seems unlikely, say Western observers.

The Kaveri engine has completed 840h of ground testing, around one-third of the programme. It is to be test flown in Russia.