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Sent to the Iraq Inquiry
1 March 2011.

IRAQ INQUIRY REQUEST FOR EVIDENCE

Support Helicopters

Steps taken to increase the provision of support helicopter capacity to UK Forces in MND(SE) between 2004 – 2009

1. The requirement for support helicopters in MND(SE) must be seen in the context of those elsewhere in Iraq and globally. In addition, the requirement in MND(SE) between 2004 and 2009 changed as the types of operations conducted by UK Forces evolved. Consequently, as the number of UK operating bases in MND(SE) reduced, so did the requirement for support helicopters there.
2. The Department withdrew its Chinook helicopters from Iraq in 2005 in order to prepare for operations in Afghanistan and replaced them with Merlin Mk3 helicopters. This was because the Chinook helicopters were best matched to the challenging 'hot and high' conditions found there. Allocating different fleets to each operational theatre, rather than splitting fleets across the two, was the most effective way to use the aircraft and minimised the burden on the logistic supply chain and allowed the Department to maintain its helicopters more efficiently, further improving their availability for operations.
3. Between 2004 and 2009 the Ministry of Defence took a number of steps to improve the Department's overall provision of support helicopters, but very few of these were directly in support of operations in Multi-National Division (South East) (MND(SE)). Of these steps, the procurement of six Merlin Mk3a helicopters increased the size of the Merlin force from March 2008. The decision to buy the Mk3a Merlin, like that to convert the Chinook Mk3 aircraft to a configuration similar to those already deployed on operations in Afghanistan, was taken on the basis that new helicopters of a type already in service can be deployed on operations more quickly than those of an entirely new type. The additional work needed to bring a new helicopter type into service, such as establishing the aircraft's safety or training crews, meant that it would be unlikely that any new helicopter type would have been available in time for deployment in MND(SE).
4. In addition to increasing the number of available helicopters, the Department took steps to increase the number of flying hours that each helicopter provided, increasing the capacity provided by its existing fleets. For example, between September and December 2006, the Department increased the number of flying hours delivered by the five Merlin Mk3 aircraft in MND(SE) from 325 to 350 hours per month.

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MOD Helicopter Procurement Strategies 2003 - 2009

1. In 2003, the UK's support helicopter force comprised a forward fleet of 31 Chinook Mk2/2a, 18 Merlin Mk3, 33 Sea King Mk4 and 34 Puma Mk1 helicopters. These aircraft were supported by Gazelle and Lynx light helicopters.
2. Up until 2004, the Ministry of Defence was planning to replace its Puma and Sea King helicopter fleets through the Support Amphibious Battlefield Helicopter (SABR) programme. The SABR initial gate business case of late 2003 indicated, subject to further work during the Assessment Phase, that the most likely solution was likely to be the procurement of 50 to 60 additional Chinook aircraft, with the first six aircraft expected to be received in 2012/13, and the full order delivered by 2025.
3. During the planning round in 2004, as part of a broad Departmental affordability exercise, a £1.4 billion saving was taken from the total helicopter programme. This led the Department to abandon the SABR programme and triggered a revision of wider helicopter procurement strategy, resulting in the Future Rotorcraft Capability (FRC) programme. Had SABR continued, the earliest delivery of new Chinooks would have been after the end of UK operations in Iraq, so the Department does not assess that the removal of £1.4 billion from the helicopter programme affected the availability of support helicopters for operations in Iraq.
4. In August 2005, the FRC study concluded that the Department should proceed with the Assessment Phase for the replacement of its Search and Rescue helicopters, and that work should continue towards the replacement for the Lynx helicopter and updating the Royal Navy's Merlin helicopters, but that further work would be needed to determine the best strategy for delivering the MOD's future battlefield support helicopter fleet. A subsequent study, known as the Lift Advanced Concept Phase (LACP), was completed in 2006 and recommended investments to extend the out-of-service dates of Puma HC1 and Sea King Mk4 to 2022 and 2018 respectively. This would allow them to be replaced through the staggered acquisition of a new medium helicopter under a Future Medium Helicopter competition, which was to be initiated in 2010.
5. In the period 2005 – 2009, the MOD took a number of steps to improve the performance and availability of support helicopters for operations including the procurement of six Merlin Mk3a helicopters, the fielding of the Chinook Mk3 helicopters and performance upgrades on Chinook and Sea King helicopters.
6. The LACP strategy for the delivery of support helicopter capability remained in place until after the withdrawal of UK troops from Iraq in May 2009.

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