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UPDATE FOR THE PRIME MINISTER ON HELICOPTER ISSUES

Helicopters are a key capability for our armed forces, the utility and flexibility of which has been proven time and again in operations since 2001. Making the most of our existing and future helicopter fleet, to give the best possible service to deployed troops, is a top priority for my Department. But given the scale and intensity of our current operational commitments, there will always be demands for more helicopters on operations.

The best measure of helicopter support to operations is a combination of the amount they can carry, particularly in hot weather and at altitude, and the number of helicopter hours available to commanders. We are deploying more capable helicopters, which can operate more effectively in the challenging operational flying conditions. And our measures to increase hours are bearing fruit. In March, commanders were able to call upon 1050 hours per month from the UK helicopter fleet in Afghanistan. By the end of this year, they will have 1400 and by December 2008, 1700.

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We have also been working hard to make ready for operations the 14 additional helicopters which were announced in March 2007. The first two Merlins will be ready for deployment by April next year and the first Chinooks by the end of 2009. The original requirement for the extra Merlins in Iraq has now fallen away along with our reduction in force levels there, so we are now pursuing as a priority their deployment to Afghanistan.

Sustainable Delivery

One of the principles underpinning the steps we have been taking since March has been to rationalise our helicopter types by theatre. This allows us to rationalise our support arrangements, making them more effective and efficient. While we are clear about the imperative to provide increased support to operations in the short term, we are also concerned not to sacrifice the future sustainability of the helicopter fleet for the immediate needs of today. That means trying to maintain harmony for our personnel and carrying out the vital maintenance and upgrade work on our equipment so that it remains deployable over the longer term, in line with our enduring operational commitments over the next decade.

Current Deployments

The bulk of our deployed helicopter fleet is in Afghanistan, where we now have 9 Chinook, 8 Apache, 4 Lynx (with another due to deploy this month) and 4 Sea King (with two more due to deploy this month and a further two in April next year) supporting ISAF and . In addition, within Regional Command (South) there are 8 Dutch helicopters providing support to ISAF operations and 26 US helicopters in Task Force Corsair which support both ISAF and Operation Enduring Freedom in Southern Afghanistan.

In Iraq, following withdrawal of the Sea King fleet, the UK now has 5 Merlin and 6 Lynx in Basra and 4 Puma and 3 Lynx in Baghdad supporting UK Theatre Forces and the Baghdad air bridge. Despite the expected reduction in

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UK personnel deployed in Southern Iraq next year, there will be a residual requirement for 5 Merlin in the re-intervention, medical and surveillance roles, which can be expected to endure for the remainder of our commitment there.

The Helicopter Requirement

Although the recent Puma crash in Baghdad is likely to have some temporary, but manageable, impact on our ^{UK Theatre Forces} operations there, helicopter support to operations in Iraq is generally assessed as satisfactory. The provision of additional helicopter capability in Southern Afghanistan is therefore our priority. Commanders on the ground there assess that they have the minimum number of assets to do essential tasks, with a degree of risk. However, in order to achieve our strategic goals, we need to deliver more than this.

Assessing exactly how much more helicopter support we need is complicated. The rapidly evolving operational situation makes accurate predictions extremely difficult. In addition, some realism is necessary. To fulfil all of our commanders' aspirations would simply not be achievable: not all tasks to which we might aspire are of equal importance, and we and our allies face constraints in the availability of funding, equipment and personnel. Commanders therefore plan around the number of assets they have, rather than what they would like. The bottom line is that commanders could always do with more helicopters, and we must continue to do everything we can to meet that desire as best we can.

Helicopter Deployability

It may seem counter-intuitive that, despite the fact we have so many more helicopters in our inventory, we are able to deploy a relatively small number on operations. We are limited by the need to keep the burden on our airframes, crews and ground support staff at a sustainable level over time. As a rule of thumb, it takes 3 or 4 additional helicopters to enable the deployment of a single helicopter on operations, with the remaining aircraft used for

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training and to enable us to rotate our deployed helicopters in and out of maintenance and to carry out essential modification programmes. The 6 additional Merlins we have bought from Denmark will therefore theoretically allow us to deploy and sustain 2 extra aircraft on operations from April 2008, and the 8 modified Chinook will allow us to sustain an additional 2 or 3 Chinook to Afghanistan by the end of 2009. This represents the potential to sustain 5 additional helicopters on operations, at any one time, from 2010.

Additional Capability Delivered to Afghanistan Since March 2007

Since the announcement in March, we have already made considerable progress in improving the helicopter lift available to commanders in Afghanistan. Most significantly, we are well on the way to completing the switch of the Sea King fleet from Iraq to Afghanistan. Four have already deployed with new, state of the art main and tail rotor blades which improve performance in the hot Afghan summer and at altitude; four more will follow between now and the spring. We have also streamlined our support and maintenance, which has allowed us to deliver the same number of hours with fewer airframes and will allow us to increase flying hours for Chinook in Afghanistan from 400 hours per month to 500 from April 2008. Two additional Lynx have been providing support to commanders and Other Government Departments since early November. The effect of these steps is that the total flying hours available from the in Afghanistan has increased from 1050 a month in March this year to 1400 a month by the end of December – an increase of a third, despite a small reduction in the numbers of helicopters deployed in the country.

Delivering Additional Capability in the Future

The key indicator is the number of hours we will be providing commanders in future, which is set out in the appended table. The addition of the 8 Chinook Mk3 helicopters to the fleet in Afghanistan should allow us by early 2010 to increase Chinook hours again from the 500 hours we will achieve by spring 2008. A programme is in place to source spares and train personnel which

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will allow us to increase the hours available from Apache in April 2008 from 350 hours a month to 400, with a further increase to 500 in January 2009. The constraint on increasing flying hours for Apache is currently the number of trained mechanics, spares and Apache aircrew. By April next year, we expect to be in a position where the Sea King fleet will be devoted exclusively to operations in Afghanistan, with 8 helicopters deployed on an enduring basis. In total, the steps that we are taking should see a total of 1700 hours delivered by the UK helicopter fleet in Afghanistan by December 2008, compared to 1050 hours in March this year -- an increase of over 60%.

In addition, as you will be aware, plans by NATO to award a contract for the movement of 13,000kgs per day in support of ISAF are reaching maturity. With an implementation date of February 2008, the NATO contract is expected to provide around 10,000kgs of freight movement per day in support of operations specifically in Southern Afghanistan. It is anticipated that this has the potential to release some further 100 UK Chinook and 50 UK Apache hours per month for other tasking. In parallel, should the NATO initiative fail, the UK has developed a unilateral solution that could be in place within 3 months of a decision to proceed.

Exploiting the Iraq dividend

The procurement of the six new Danish Merlins was originally designed to allow us to augment our Merlin fleet in Iraq and thus withdraw the Sea King Mk4 helicopters, in order to enable their rapid deployment to Afghanistan. However, the reduction in our troop levels in Iraq now means that we have already withdrawn the Sea Kings earlier than planned and that, apart from some limited augmentation over the summer months, we no longer expect to require the two additional Danish Merlins to fulfil the requirements there.

This means that, once the new Merlins are declared ready for operations next April, we will now find ourselves with some spare capacity in the fleet. I am determined that these helicopters should not sit idle. At present, however, we do not have the engineering manpower or the spares to support two separate

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deployments of Merlin in Afghanistan as well as Iraq. The focus of our attention now will be upon what is needed to develop the capability as quickly as possible to sustain a deployment of Merlins in Afghanistan, should it be required, in addition to supporting the residual requirement in Iraq.

Conclusion

To borrow a line from David Cameron, there is no 'magic pot' of money into which we can dip in order to buy all the helicopters we might like to. We do not have access to the Treasury Reserve for the procurement of such enduring capabilities, and helicopters must compete with other pressing requirements within our hard-pressed equipment programme. Equally, neither are there any helicopters currently readily available on the market which would be an obvious aspiration for us; most order books are full, and the procurement of a new helicopter type would be both costly and time-consuming.

That said, I can give you an assurance that, while we continue to make the most of what we have got, the new Chinook and Merlin helicopters will, over time, deliver a significant enhancement in our operational capabilities. This is not an area where we can afford complacency. We shall continue to seek out opportunities to improve and enhance our deployed helicopter fleets, in particular by working to develop the capability to support a Merlin deployment in each of our operational theatres, but I believe that we are on the right path towards an enduring and sustainable capability which will allow us to fulfil our key tasks, delivering upon our important commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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