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Czech Republic for Afghanistan

New helicopters for Afghan National Army Air Corps

In February 2009, LOM PRAHA, on behalf of the Czech Republic, handed over the last three overhauled Mi-24V attack helicopters. All in all, the Afghan National Army Air Corps (ANAAC) was given 12 helicopters which significantly expanded its fleet. Let´s take a glance at the whole project.

Afghan´s Request

In 2001, a new Afghan National Army, supervised by allied countries, was established. However, it lacked military equipment. Some Mi-8/8MT helicopters, An-29/28 aircraft, and L-39 trainer aircraft did not meet the new military's requirements. At that time ANAAC was recruiting military personnel and it was expected that the number of flying hours would increase gradually. Even though some "future" pilots had flown over 2,000 flight hours they had not flown since the mid-1990s. Thus, "future" pilots had to pass a refresher course.

Since 2002, the Afghan Ministry of Defense has requested donations of either new or surplus military equipment from the international community. In 2006, Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers in Europe (SHAPE) took measures to increase the combat potential of the new born Afghan National Army. In October 2006, the Czech Republic offered six Mi-24V attack helicopters and six Mi-17 transport helicopters. The donation was approved by Russian OEM partners and a refurbishment contract was signed in March 2007.

Other NATO member countries have donated equipment mainly to ground forces: for example, Switzerland provided the ANA with three special fire trucks; Finland donated field telephones; Belgium gave armored vests; and Canada, Latvia, Hungary, and Estonia provided arms. The key partner, the United States of

■ The first overhauled Mi-17 helicopter for Afghan National Army Air Corps. Flight tests were run on 4 September 2007 at Kbely Airport. Left - the turret with a 12.7 mm 9-A-624 quadruple machine-gun on Mi-24V

America, financially supported the purchase and repair of some aircraft.

Repair and Overhaul Process

The donated Czech Mi helicopters needed comprehensive repairs since the Czech Air Force had not used them for several years. In consultation with Combined Security Transition Command - Afghanistan and SHAPE HQ, LOM Praha agreed to upgrade the aircraft with high altitude engines, cockpit enhancements, western-style avionics, and additional fuel tanks and rocket pods. Financially, the overhauls were paid by the United States through the SHAPE Headquarters contracting agency. This project is ranked among the most expensive export projects in the Czech history. In addition, the Czech Army provided the ANA with a number of spare parts, engines, APUs, and FFAR pods or transport boxes.

LOM PRAHA began to overhaul the transport helicopters first; the Mi-24V helicopters had their turn later on. The first stage of overhaul started immediately after the dismantled helicopters were transported from Prerov Air Base in the eastern part of the Czech Republic to LOM PRAHA facilities in Prague. Inspection of the Mi-17 transport helicopters determined the scope of work. All helicopters underwent the same overhaul process.

First the fuselage was disassembled and engineers checked and tested particular parts and units to determine their condition. Some components were repaired, some were replaced. Next, the helicopters were reassembled, inspected again, and given a special ANA paint scheme. Finally, the helicopters were sent to Kbely Airport where flight tests were performed. To identify the numerical sequence of refurbished Afghan Mi helicopters, the first overhauled Mi-17 helicopter was given fuselage number 571. Refurbished Mi-24V helicopters begin with number 113.

■ Mi-17 helicopter's instrument board

Upgrades

The original TV3-117MT turboshaft engines were replaced by more powerful TV3-117VM

■ In 2 September 2008 the first overhauled Mi-24V helicopter took off

■ Mi-24V helicopter's instrument board

engines and their equivalent components since the rebuilt helicopters would fly in high altitudes and extreme temperatures. Five Mi-17s were fitted with bulkier fuel tanks (Czech Army helicopter #0832 already had these tanks) which were considered as very useful in Afghan hostile conditions. Fuel tanks were filled with PUR fire suppression foam and covered with self-healing foam which could mend any penetration. Additional armor was placed in the nose and in the fuselage, except for the #0832 which was already equipped with the armoring and a vibration damper. In addition, the Mi-17s received unguided missile pods on both sides, and a new control desk and bombing periscope in the cockpit. Originally all these components belonged to the standard helicopter equipment from the 1980s, however, in the 1990s they were removed due to international disarmament agreements.

The six Mi-24V attack helicopters underwent a similar repair and overhaul process. TV3-117VMA turboshaft engines replaced the TV3-117V engines. New communications equipment for the Mi-17 and Mi-24V helicopters consists of a KT-73 (CI-100 or KA-61) transponder, COM 1/2 AT-160 radios (white aerials over and under the tailboom), and a Dayton Granger 17760 (a black tubular aerial on the starboard side of the tailboom).

In October 2007, the first three Mi-17 helicopters were completed. They were officially handed over to the ANA at the 24th Air Transportation Base at Prague-Kbely on November 21. The ceremony was attended by Vlasta Parkanova, Minister of Defense of the Czech Republic, Lieutenant General Vlastimil Picek, Chief of General Staff of Army of the Czech Republic, General Major Ladislav Minarik, Air Force Commander, LOM PRAHA repre-

■ After test flights were successfully completed helicopters were shipped to Pardubice Air Base and loaded on Antonov AN-124 transport aircraft
Right - UB-32-57 rocket pods on a Mi-17 helicopter.

sentatives, and last but not the least, senior leaders of Afghan National Army Air Corps. These helicopters were dismantled and on December 4 shipped from Pardubice Airport to Kabul by Antonov Airlines using An-124 Russian aircraft. The second batch of three Mi-17 helicopters was handed over in June 2008. LOM PRAHA technicians accompanied each batch to Kabul and arranged the unloading, assembling, flight tests, and maintenance on-site. The first three Mi-24V helicopters were finished in August and September 2008. Flight tests were accomplished and in November 2008 the helicopters were shipped to Afghanistan. The last three Mi-24Vs were delivered to Kabul in February 2009.

New Beginning

After reassembly, the helicopters were test-flown using a number of technical devices and tools. Despite humble working and living conditions everything ran without serious problems and the helicopters were handed over to Afghan representatives in good shape. The work done by LOM Praha was highly regarded by both Afghan and international coalition aviation experts.

The ANA Air Corps uses Mi-17 helicopters for training, transport, and air evacuation tasks, whereas, the Mi-24Vs are usually engaged in combat. Unfortunately, hostile mountainous conditions caused the loss of #0829 (tail number 574). It crashed into a mountain in western Afghanistan´s Herat province, the Adraskat region. The pilot and all 13 passengers including General Fazl Ahmad Sayar, one of Afghanistan´s top commanders, were killed. In January 2009, another Mi-17 helicopter (0819/576) was damaged while on the ground. Damage was caused by airflow from a landing helicopter. Luckily, the damaged tailboom can be fixed. Currently the extent of damage is being inspected on-site.

■ After unloading the Mi-24V helicopter at Kabul International Airport the helicopter is ready to be assembled

Conclusion

The refurbished helicopters significantly improve both the training and combat capabilities of the Afghan National Army Air Corps. They are a key element for developing a professional air force. Afghan government representatives have shown appreciation for this donation several times since the new Mil helicopters arrived when there was a desperate need of aircraft. Many foreign visitors to LOM PRAHA, Czech Republic have praised the work of our technicians; they did not believe the ANA helicopters were refurbished. This project is an excellent example of Czech aircraft industry professionalism and performance. ■