AIRBUS A400M MILITARY TRANSPORT PLANE HITS MORE TROUBLE

News / Manufacturer

The torturous development process of the A400M transport plane has been extended yet again after Germany's Defense Ministry admitted that it had been hit more technical problems. Its latest delivery date is now in doubt.

Germany's list of military equipment calamities was extended once again on Friday, when the country's biggest newspaper reported that the new European transporter plane, the Airbus A400M Atlas, had faulty engines.

The "Bild" newspaper reported that parts of the propeller engines could not cope with extreme temperatures and that individual parts of the engine were found to have "material flaws." The newspaper also claimed that one engine on a British A400M had cut out during a flight, though this had not yet happened to the three planes already owned by Germany's air force.

The Defense Ministry confirmed the report on Friday. "Yes, it's true that the airplane manufacturer has found problems with the propeller engine," a spokeswoman for the ministry told the Reuters news agency before adding that the Italian company that manufactures the engines for Airbus was analyzing the problems and that Airbus had offered to repair the engines free of charge.

The ministry added that the nine new A400Ms that Germany has already ordered - which are currently being manufactured - were also being checked, though it remained unclear when they

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would be delivered. "We don't yet have a current delivery plan for this year," the spokeswoman said.

Spanien Absturz Airbus A400M

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An A400M crashed in Spain in May last year

Extra costs for the taxpayer

The development of the four-engine Airbus plane has become a saga of faults and misfires. Initially, its main problem was being overweight, and thus unable to carry the military vehicles it needed to.

But after its budget began to balloon - currently to over 20 billion euros ($23 billion), according to the "Defense Industry Daily" - it soon became clear that the project would be unable to break even without sales to countries outside NATO. The only trouble: The constant delays meant that many potential customers, such as South Africa, began looking elsewhere for alternatives - or even suing Airbus for compensation.

The A400M finally had its maiden flight in 2009, but the first aircraft was only delivered to France's air force in August 2013. The Germans did not get their first aircraft until a year later.

In May 2015, one A400M intended for Turkey's air force crashed during a test flight in Spain as a result of engine failure caused by a software glitch. In response, Germany was one of several countries to ground all their A400Ms.

In December, Germany's Defense Ministry secured the promise of a compensation payment from Airbus because of the delays. But members of the parliament's defense committee criticized the figure - 13 million euros - as too low, on the grounds that the costs to the German taxpayer would be "several times higher," as Rainer Arnold, defense policy spokesman for the Social Democrats, put it.

Future problems

A few weeks ago, parliamentary and military sources were quoted in the press saying that the German air force was considering planes from other manufacturers to "complement" the A400M -

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not because of the late delivery, but because it did not have all the capabilities that the air force required.

But, despite nominal plans to complete construction of the new planes this year, Germany's Defense Ministry admitted on Friday that it did not know whether Airbus would actually be able deliver new planes in 2016.

Tobias Lindner, the defense spokesman for the Greens, described hopes that the new plane could be finished this year as "extremely unrealistic," because the new engine problems would cause more delays.

The fate of the A400M is doubly unfortunate because it was poised to take a significant market share from the US Lockheed Martin C-130 Hercules. If the plane is ever successful, industry experts believe that it could also pose a serious threat to Russian transport planes such as the AN-70, the IL-76 and the AN-124.

In 2014, the A400M became one of several overspending defense projects (including the Eurofighter and the Tiger helicopter) to be assessed by the international consultancy KPMG at the behest of the German government.

It concluded that one major problem was that Germany's military procurement authority, the BAAINBw, was severely understaffed. Not only that, KPMG also noticed that the delays to projects created waves of inefficiency that rippled throughout the military. As the weekly "Die Zeit" pointed out in 2015, if the air force only has three A400Ms, it makes no sense to train pilots to fly them, but when the planes are finally rolled out, the air force will suddenly lack trained pilots.

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