CHINOOK GETS A BOOST FROM MOROCCO

News / Manufacturer

The Boeing CH-47 **Chinook** heavy-lift helicopter is set to re-enter service with the Royal Moroccan Air (RMAF). Jon Lake reports.

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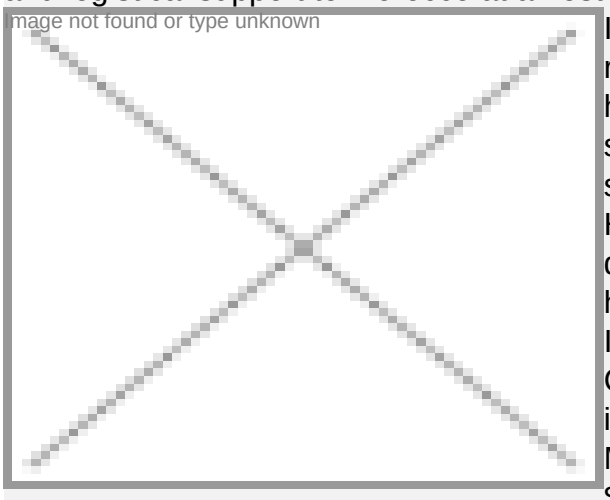
Three ex-US Army Reserve CH-47D aircraft were delivered to the port of Tangier on Saturday August 15, arriving on board the roll-on/roll-off ship Liberty Pride.

Morocco has already operated the Chinook, having ordered 12 CH-47Cs from Italy's Elicotteri Meridonali during the 1970s. These were delivered in two batches of six in 1979 and 1982, and served with the Escadre Hélicoptère at No1 Air Base at Rabat/Salé.

Most were upgraded to CH-47C(M) standards but serviceability declined, and though some sources suggested that Morocco was still "believed to operate between three and eight surviving CH-47Cs", by the beginning of 2015, the type was no longer in operational service.

Morocco has wanted to boost its heavy-lift helicopter capability for some time, to improve its ability to mount humanitarian aid missions, and for military transport missions, if needed.

On October 26 2009 the US Defense Security Cooperation Agency notified Congress of a possible Foreign Military Sale (FMS) of three CH-47D Chinook helicopters and associated parts, equipment and logistical support to Morocco at an estimated cost of $134 million.



It was announced that the Government of Morocco had requested a possible sale of three CH-47D Chinook helicopters with six T55-GA-714A turbine engines, two spare T-55-GA-714A engines, and other related systems, spares and services.

However, due to Morocco's budget constraints, the delivery could not be expedited, and since then efforts have been under way to find a more affordable solution.

In the end the United States Army Security Assistance Command (USASAC) put together a package, which included three Chinooks as well as the training of Moroccan crews, tools, publications and spare parts for $78.9 million. Honeywell was to provide T55-GA-714A engines under a separate foreign military sales contract that was announced by the US Department of Defense (DoD) in July 2014.

At the heart of the new deal were three second-hand, ex- US Army Reserve CH-47D helicopters, which underwent a seven-month, $6 million refurbishment at the hands of Columbia Helicopters. This included repainting the aircraft in full Moroccan markings – including military crests, national flags and serial/registration markings – and flight- testing in Morocco.

"At the end of the process, we're going to hand Morocco's air force three aircraft that are completely reconditioned and in excellent shape." said Scott Ellis, director of business development for Columbia Helicopters. "By the time we're finished with the helicopters and present them to Morocco, they'll look just like brand new helicopters."

The refurbishing took about 400 hours per aircraft and included a complete and rigorous inspection, with replacement of any faulty or worn out components. It also covered engine overhauls.

As well as being a US maintenance repair and overhaul (MRO) company, Columbia Helicopters is also the largest commercial operator of Chinook helicopters in the world, having operated the commercial Model 234 Chinook and, more recently, the Boeing CH-47D.

The company's extensive experience in maintaining these heavy-lift helicopters made it a strong contender for the refurbishment of the Chinooks for Morocco.

The work was undertaken inside a separate, secure 16,000sqft military maintenance hangar within the company's FAA-licensed MRO facility at its headquarters in Aurora in Oregon.

This new facility, totally focused on military helicopter MRO, was officially opened as the company's new Military Maintenance Facility on August 1 2014, and has sufficient space for three maintenance tracks for three Chinook-sized helicopters. The building was previously used for the

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support and maintenance of ground support equipment.
Columbia Helicopters received final DoD approval to perform work for the US military, as well as export customers, under the FMS programme during the third week of August. With about 40 ex-US military Chinooks already offered for sale, Columbia hopes to win further similar work for future export customers and anticipates business opportunities from US military operators of the Chinook based in the western part of the continental USA.
Columbia Helicopters started work on the Moroccan Chinooks in late August 2014, and the aircraft arrived at its Aurora facility in November. The first of the three helicopters was re-flown in April 2015.
All three helicopters had been rolled out by June, ready for their long sea voyage to Morocco. When they arrived in kingdom, the helicopters were met by a team from Columbia Helicopters, who finished putting them into flight-ready status.
The new Chinooks will restore a much-missed heavy-lift capability to Morocco's helicopter force, which is currently estimated to consist of 25-47 Agusta-Bell AB-205As, between five and 12 AB-206 Jet Rangers, four Bell 212s, two Sikorsky UH-60 Black Hawks, 19-23 Aérospatiale SA-342 Gazelles, and 24-26 SA-330 Pumas.

02 NOVEMBER 2015

SOURCE: AFRICANAEROSPACE
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