

EUROPE

Date Posted: 16-Mar-2011

Jane's Defence Weekly

UK looks to extend Nimrod R.1 service**Tim Ripley** *JDW Correspondent*

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Operational requirements for signals and electronic intelligence (SIGINT/ELINT) relating to the situation in Libya have forced the UK Royal Air Force (RAF) to deploy one of its two remaining Hawker Siddeley Nimrod R.1s to the Mediterranean, just two weeks before the aircraft were due to be withdrawn from service.

A Nimrod R.1 left its home base at RAF Waddington in Lincolnshire on 3 March and has been flying surveillance missions in the central Mediterranean from RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus. Military sources say the Nimrod R.1 is monitoring the Libyan conflict and the compliance of Moammar Ghadaffi regime with international arms embargoes and other sanctions.

Jane's has been told by RAF sources that the aircraft's out-of-service date (OSD) could be extended by 90 days to allow it to take part in Operation Deference: the UK military's codename for the mission to monitor Libya. The sources say there is a debate within the UK government over how to fund the service extension.

Last October's Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) backed an existing plan to retire the fleet of three Nimrod R.1s by the end of March 2011. This was to make way for Boeing RC-135W Rivet Joint SIGINT/ELINT aircraft being bought from L3 Communications via a US Foreign Military Sales deal. The first RC-135W, dubbed Airseeker by the UK, is not due to be delivered until 2014, leaving a three-year gap in UK strategic airborne SIGINT/ELINT capability.

One Nimrod R.1 was retired in November 2009 while the remaining two aircraft have continued to support UK and NATO operations in Afghanistan. The extension is likely to be temporary as the UK Ministry of Defence has wound down the infrastructure needed to support the aircraft; the main Nimrod overhaul facility at RAF Kinloss in Moray was closed in 2010 after the RAF withdrew its Nimrod MR.2s from service.

The RAF would not comment on the deployment of the Nimrod R.1, with a spokesman saying: "We do not discuss what our intelligence-gathering aircraft are doing for reasons of operational security. We are assessing if, in the current circumstances, we might like to extend the life of this platform for the short-term. The original decision to take the R.1 out of service was taken in 2008 and is not a result of the SDSR."

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