

MoD cost cuts 'will put troops in peril'

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The lives of troops will be put at risk if the Ministry of Defence goes ahead with plans to refurbish a fleet of vintage helicopters as a cost-cutting measure, defence sources said yesterday.

Servicemen, already concerned after the shooting down of a Lynx in Basra last week, said that if 30 Sea King helicopters were taken out of mothballs their low speed and poor performance in the desert heat would make them "sitting ducks".



An RAF helicopter flies over Iraq: the cost-cutting measure would 'severely endanger lives'

A shortfall in the number of troop transport helicopters has led to defence chiefs proposing to bring former Royal Navy anti-submarine Sea Kings out of storage for use in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The move has prompted a military engineer working on the helicopter programme to condemn the cost-cutting measure that would "severely endanger the lives of my colleagues".

"Why is it that the MoD insists on putting costs of equipment above its duty of care to the service personnel they ought to be providing the best kit to?" the source said.

"Compounding the catastrophe is that its maximum speed at its maximum height is a mere 50 knots - in other words they will be sitting ducks." He added that the "hot and high" performance of the Sea King was "woeful".

advertisement While the Sea Kings are generally regarded as robust by troops, their age and poor hot weather performance have led to several being grounded in Iraq.

Liam Fox, the shadow defence secretary, who has previously criticised the lack of troop transport being sent to Afghanistan for the three-year deployment, said: "This could seriously impact upon the ability of British forces to operate in such a hostile environment where travelling by road is so dangerous.

"It would be very worrying if following recent events in Iraq we were to put helicopters back into service that could pose a threat to the safety of our troops."

Concern over the military's plans comes amid repeated warnings by commanders that the 3,300 British troops deploying to southern Afghanistan face a torrid time at the hands of Taliban insurgents.

The troops, who are providing security for a reconstruction programme in volatile Helmand province, face the constant threat of attack and have already been the target of a suicide bombing, in which two soldiers were injured.

Powerful warlords, heavily-armed drug traffickers and the resurgent forces of the deposed Taliban regime, with weapons including rockets at their disposal, all have the British forces in their sights.

Taliban and al-Qa'eda propagandists are attempting to bolster their ranks with a recruitment campaign in Pakistan for "martyrs" prepared to kill British soldiers across the Afghan border.

The Conservatives see the proposals as the latest evidence of the financial squeeze on the armed forces under Labour.

The defence budget has fallen from £34.6 billion in 1999-2000 to £31 billion in 2004-05 in real terms, putting pressure on the armed forces at a time when senior officers are issuing warnings about overstretch.

The Army's current strength is 101,000, about 10,000 less than when Labour came to power.

The situation is even worse in the Navy, where the number of sailors has fallen from 46,000 to less than 36,000, while the RAF has seen personnel numbers drop from 57,000 to 48,000.

Next month the MoD will decide whether to use the redundant Sea Kings, which are stored in Fleetwood, Hants, or to extend the service life of the RAF's 38 Pumas, which should be retired in four years.

Even if the ageing Sea Kings are refurbished at £10 million each, they will only be able to carry about five troops each with extra weight added by the crews' body armour, new radios, machine guns and anti-missile devices.

Almost a quarter of Britain's Joint Helicopter Command is either unusable or under repair, leaving commanders in Afghanistan dependent on the huge US helicopter fleet.

Tim Ripley, an aviation analyst at Jane's Defence Weekly, said: "They are wheeling out planes to extend their shelf life because there is not enough money for new helicopters until 2015."

The MoD said it had no plans "at the moment" to send any Sea Kings to Afghanistan. "We are currently looking at a number of options and no decision has been made yet," a MoD spokesman said.

He added that £4.5 billion had been set aside for the next decade to develop the "future rotorcraft capability programme".

It has also been revealed that the Army's Apache fleet will not be going to Afghanistan fitted with its special £15 million radar, a move which will allow the aircraft to carry more fuel.

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