

## EUROPE

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## UK looks at thermobaric Hellfire for Afghanistan

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- The UK Army Air Corps' air-to-ground precision-guided missiles are unable to counter opposition forces operating from hardened compounds
- The efficiency of the AAC's current AGM-114K2 HEAT Hellfire warhead is under review

UK attack helicopter commanders in Afghanistan have requested the acquisition of thermobaric warheads to improve the effectiveness of their Lockheed Martin AGM-114 Hellfire missiles.

The move comes amid concerns that the Army Air Corps' (AAC's) current inventory of air-to-ground precision-guided missiles is not able to counter Taliban insurgents hiding in caves or fortified compounds.

If the purchase is approved by government ministers, it would be the first time the UK armed forces have deployed thermobaric weapons.

Variants of the Hellfire with the thermobaric warhead, dubbed the AGM-114N metal augmented charge (MAC), are already in operational service with US Army and US Marine Corps attack helicopters.

The request for the new missiles was made in late 2006, according to AAC Apache AH.1 pilots who have served in Afghanistan. As a result, the UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) has set up a study to review the effectiveness of the AAC's current AGM-114K2 high-explosive anti-tank (HEAT) Hellfire warhead against the target set currently faced in Afghanistan, an MoD spokeswoman told Jane's. Procurement options are also being studied, according to industry sources.

"This work is ongoing. It is not straightforward and involves other considerations including collateral damage. Research is being done on the performance of different warheads," said the MoD spokeswoman.

Once the study team has reached a conclusion, the doctrinal and legal implications of acquiring thermobaric weapons will be considered by the MoD's Doctrine and Concept Development Centre and by the ministry's in-house legal team respectively, she said.

She said it was normal procedure to look at the legal issues of any new weapon system that has not been fielded before by the UK armed forces to ensure the weapon complies with the UK government's international legal obligations. Thermobaric weapons have attracted criticism from human rights groups who have claimed they contravene the laws of war.

Pressure to replenish the UK's inventory of Hellfire missiles has grown after heavy usage of the weapons by AAC Apache attack helicopters in Afghanistan since April 2006. The UK originally purchased 980 AGM-114 missile rounds from Shorts Missile Systems (now Thales Air Defence) in Belfast in 1996 as part of a co-production arrangement with US partners and UK weapon system integrator Hunting Engineering.

In a four-month period alone in 2006 some 28 missiles were fired in Afghanistan and a significant number have

been fired during trials and training. The majority of the UK's rounds had HEAT warheads, which were optimised for use against armoured vehicles. As a result, AAC Apache units in Afghanistan have made disproportionate use of the high-explosive/fragmentation (HE/frag) warhead variant. UK military personnel who have recently returned from Afghanistan told *Jane's* that the HEAT-configured missiles had limited effect against Taliban hiding inside mud brick compounds because the walls do not fully detonate the warhead. The explosive charge of the HE/frag warheads has also proved to be of limited use against Taliban fighters inside deep cave complexes.

Thales has concluded production of the Hellfire but the production line remains mothballed and could be re-opened if a new order is received. This is one of the options being considered by the UK Ministry of Defence to address the high Hellfire usage over the long term. To meet an immediate need, the UK is also considering an urgent operational requirement to purchase the AGM-114N MAC variant direct from Lockheed Martin's line in Troy, Alabama, or from US Army stocks, according to industry sources. The thermobaric warheads are made by Alliant Techsystems. The US Army ordered some 900 AGM-114Ns in August 2005 in a USD90 million contract. This followed on from US Marine Corps use of the weapon in Iraq on its Bell AH-1W Cobras.

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