

From the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction

Transcript for: Operation Oversight – Episode 7: UH-60 Audit

Description: Hear about SIGAR’s recent performance audit of the Afghan Air Force’s modernization program to replace their fleet of MI-17 helicopters with UH-60 Black Hawks.

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[ Background Music ]

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ] Welcome to Operation Oversight, the official podcast for the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. My name is Jennifer George-Nichol, I’m with SIGAR’s Public Affairs office and I’m joined today by Jeff and Carole from our Audits directorate. Welcome to the podcast, guys.

[ Carole ] Thank you.

[ Jeff ] Thank you for having us.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ] Jeff and Carole are here to talk about a recently released audit of an Afghan Air Force re-modernization program that was aimed at replacing an aging helicopter fleet of MI-17s with UH-60s, or sometimes called, Black Hawks.

Before we get into the audit, can you guys tell me a little bit about the decision to modernize the Afghan Air Force’s fleet, the importance of the Afghan Air Force, why this was a priority for the United States?

[ Carole ] Sure, the Afghan Air Force is made up primarily of MI-17 helicopters which are Russian-built and it’s become, according to DOD, much more difficult to support and maintain these helicopters in part because of the deteriorating relationship between the U.S. and Russia. The aircraft are important because Afghanistan’s a large country, doesn’t have a lot of roads. So, to move people around Afghanistan and to get the Afghan Army into the fight they need to have stable and usable helicopters. So that was DOD’s understanding of why they needed to modernize the Afghan Air Force.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ] Why don’t you guys tell me about the audit and what you guys found?

[ Jeff ] Yeah, so first as you mentioned, we looked at the replacement of MI-17s with the UH-60 which was titled “the modernization of the Afghan Air Force”. There are some other helicopters that will be and other aircraft that are part of that fleet; some MD-530s and some A-29s, and things like that. However, when the 159 UH-60 Black Hawks are fielded that’ll be more than 50% of the total air force that the Afghans have. So, this audit looked at that program, which will cost between five and seven billion dollars.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ] So, with an entirely new fleet, a new aircraft, they're going to need, I assume, retrain pilots or train them, but looking at the original plan for this program, the Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan, or CSTC-A, wanted to train 477 UH-60 pilots, but now they're only going to train 320? Can you tell us what happened there? Why did they cut a large number of pilots from the program?

[ Jeff ] As DOD has self-reported again and again that human capital development for all phases of the Afghan security forces is the major challenge with any fielding of a weapon system. What originally happened was is that they planned to train one and a half pilot crews per aircraft, which generated the need for 477 pilots. Due to the expected operational readiness rate of the aircraft, only 75% of the aircraft are usually in service at one time. So they cut the ratio down from the entire fleet to the 75% that they expect to be operationally ready at any one time and then they further cut down the ratio of pilots from one and a half down to 1.25 and even as low as 1.2 or 1.1 in certain projections and that's how they arrived at the 320 number and this was all due to challenges that they have in developing pilots in the pipeline.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ] It also looks like CSTC-A is having similar problems with maintenance personnel. Can you tell us about that?

[ Jeff ] Well, I think the first thing we should mention is is that CSTC-A ended up requesting these helicopters to be in country a lot faster than they originally anticipated being able to field them and it made sense from a warfighter capability aspect that they wanted them in the field by June of 2018. So, due to that pressure and that accelerated timeline, a lot of things that would normally be planned for or be, you know, incorporated into their fielding plan they had to bypass it due to the urgency to get these into the fight. The program didn't receive any funding until about May of 2017 and they fielded the first training helicopters in October of that year with the first functional aircraft, or mission capable, aircraft arriving in January and the AAF flying their first UH-60 operational mission in May of 2018, nearly a year to the date. Normally, DOD projects it would take almost two years to reach that initial operation capability date. So, many things fell by the wayside and one of the things they had not had an opportunity to start was the maintenance training plan, or training of Afghan maintainers in their Afghan Air Force to be able to maintain those locations and help defray costs of the contractor logistic support.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ] This obviously isn't their first helicopter fleet. The fleet that they're replacing, the MI-17s, is there anything that we – the U.S. and the Afghans – have learned and can apply to the UH-60 and this transition we're going into?

[ Jeff ] I think they've learned multiple lessons, but I think many of the problems we uncovered were that this is about double the size of the fleet of MI-17, and the MI-17 they had approximately 83 aircraft that they had fielded and overall with that, so the 159 Black Hawks will be nearly double that size, and to that point, the MI-17 had been the largest single platform that they had introduced into the Air Force. So, this is – you can imagine that the challenges are exponential. So, yes, they knew that English language training, for example, would be a problem. They knew that pilot development would be a problem. The pipeline just takes a long time to take someone from an untrained civilian to a military helicopter functional

pilot, but again with the size of the Air Force that was one of our recommendations within the report was that they may not ultimately be able to absorb this many aircraft. It might just be impossible.

[ Carole ]                                    One of the things they actually learned was that the Afghan Air Force overflowed the MI-17s to the point that they're not necessarily available to be used during missions. So, one of the things that CSTC-A and the Afghan Air Force need to do to work together is to develop a program where they won't fly the aircraft too much because the aircraft have to be inspected throughout the life and when you inspect an aircraft it takes it out of operations.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ]    Do I understand correctly that the kind of thing you're talking about, a flying hours program or restrictions on flying hours, has not yet been implemented for the UH-60?

[ Carole ]                                    That's true. That was one of our recommendations that they develop a flying hour program for the UH-60 working with the Afghan Air Force.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ]    So, are there any positive notes here? Is there anything the program got right?

[ Jeff ]                                        Yes, being able to reach that initial operational capability date of May 2018 was really a positive effort by everybody involved. It involved over 60 DOD organizations to be able to field that helicopter, train the pilots, get contractor logistic support in place, and things like that. So, that was our first objective and we found that to be what we consider a good news finding.

We didn't do a lot of analysis on the actual selection of the UH-60 Alpha model aircraft, but it seems that the planning for using that aircraft to be scaled back if it needed to be instead of new procurement was a good idea. However, they never developed an actual pause point or criteria that would say this is when we're going to stop delivering aircraft, but the intent behind selecting that model was that it would be able to be scaled back if they weren't able to absorb that many aircraft. So, that's why we made the recommendation that they actually develop the actual point in time whenever aircraft exceeded the number of air crews on the ground that functionally used the helicopter, that they pause or terminate delivery of aircraft at that point. But we left that point where that would happen up to them.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ]    And it's my understanding as well, is this correct, that air capabilities going forward, if we're to be able to eventually get out of Afghanistan will be important for the Afghan national defense forces to have well developed?

[ Carole ]                                    Yes, they need to have the helicopters and how to use the helicopters in a fight to get us out of Afghanistan.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ]    This is all really interesting. Generally, on the podcast we like to ask, since we deal with some somewhat wonky topics here at SIGAR, why should this program

and its successes and or failures be important to the average American? Why does the U.S. taxpayer care about something happening literally halfway around the world?

[ Jeff ] Well, I would say that, in my opinion, the American taxpayers are paying for a lot of this. This is their money that's going to support the Afghan national security forces and the country itself. And one of the hardest challenges with replacing the American forces in Afghanistan where those combat enablers, you know, you can train an army, you can fight, and all of those things and the Afghans may be good at that, but medevac, close air support, all those things- what we consider combat enablers that help win the fight are the hardest thing to train and this is where the UH-60s come in and ultimately this is a key crux in maintaining American interest in Afghanistan, you know, ultimately contributing to that mission not allowing Afghanistan to be used for a hotbed of terrorism and terrorist acts like 9/11.

[ Carole ] In addition, if the Afghans can't fly their own helicopters then it might fall to the U.S. to provide helicopter support to the Afghans which would mean more Americans at risk.

[ Jennifer George-Nichol ] Absolutely, and more American taxpayer dollars, it sounds like. Thank you guys so much. This was really interesting. Congrats on the audit. If you would like to read the [audit](#) itself, it can be found on our website [www.sigar.mil](http://www.sigar.mil) as can all the other SIGAR reports that have both been discussed on this podcast and not. Or, to follow our products, you can check us out on Facebook at [SIGARHQ](#) or on [Twitter](#) at the same handle. Thanks for listening to the latest episode of Operation Oversight. We'll see you guys next time.

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