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Air force chief flies to defence of new fighter



The Canadian Press Photo: This photo provided by Northrop Grumman Corp., shows a pre-production model of a F-35 Joint...

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By Murray Brewster, The Canadian Press

OTTAWA - The head of Canada's air force flew to the defence of the federal government's planned \$9-billion purchase of 65 new stealth jetfighters, describing the F-35 Lightning II as an expensive — but necessary — part of the country's military network.

Lt.-Gen. Andre Deschamps said he understands that the hefty pricetag has raised public eyebrows during a time of restraint, but pointed out the early-1980s purchase of the country's current fleet of CF-18s, at \$3.2 billion, was almost as expensive in relative terms as the new program.

"The \$9 billion, yeah, it's a bit of sticker shock — it's a big number, but you know the last time I checked, nothing gets cheaper over time," the chief of air staff said Tuesday.

"Is it an unreasonable cost? I don't think so."

The announcement of the sole-source contract with U.S. defence giant Lockheed Martin earlier this summer has generated a lot of political flak for the Conservative government, with critics questioning the enormous cost at a time when Ottawa is trying to claw its way out of deficit.

Deschamps made himself available Tuesday, saying he wanted to correct the record and dispel what he saw as confusion surrounding the purchase and the capability of the aircraft.

"The purpose of today is to bring as much clarity to the debate as possible," he said.

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His comments came on the same day Public Works Minister Rona Ambrose stumped through the West Coast and praised the F-35 deal in front of workers at Avcorp Industries, in Delta, B.C., which just won a contract related to the program.

The public relations offensive also comes in advance of planned hearings next month by the House of Commons defence committee.

When the standard 20-year maintenance contract is included, the cost of the F-35 could climb as high as \$16 billion, making the deal the largest military procurement in the country's history.

Opposition critics and experts, such as former defence official Alan Williams, have said that the acquisition of new fighters should be open to competition and have slammed the decision to award it as a sole-source contract. They point out that the price per aircraft has not been fixed and could fluctuate depending on how many planes Lockheed Martin sells.

Deschamps said Canada is expected to pay between \$70 million and \$75 million per aircraft and the price will be locked in once Ottawa signs a final agreement, likely in 2014.

The air force examined other choices, including an improved version of the CF-18 and the Eurofighter, but the Lightning II proved to be the best all-round aircraft, he said.

However, the chief of air staff would not say what the price difference between the various aircraft might be, citing the confidentiality of the competing aircraft makers.

Critics have also raised concern about maintenance, since the aircraft is brand new and has yet to establish a track record. But Deschamps said the air force is confident any glitches and repair bugs would be worked out by the time Canada takes possession of the first aircraft in 2017.

There's also been concern that the Lightning II is not suitable for close air support bombing, a critical role given the country's recent experience in Afghanistan.

The F-35 can bomb and strafe targets on the ground, but Deschamps said unmanned combat aerial vehicles are increasingly taking on that function.

He said the primary role of the new jet will be to control the country's airspace.

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