

Forces search for substitute Sea King



Photo: Department of National Defence/CP

A Sea King helicopter lies on the deck of HMCS Iroquois, where it crash-landed Thursday after a power failure during takeoff.

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Halifax/Ottawa — Senior Canadian Forces navy and air force officers are searching for a Sea King helicopter to replace the one badly damaged on board HMCS Iroquois that was bound for the Arabian Sea this week. The helicopter crashed on Thursday.

A flight inspection team from the Department of National Defence is to begin examining the damaged Sea King when the Iroquois arrives in Halifax Saturday. The aircraft will be removed from the ship by crane and taken to a hangar in Canadian Forces Base Shearwater.

A member of the helicopter crew suffered a knee injury, and a piece of flying metal injured a firefighter's hand when the Sea King crashed onto the deck.

Damage to the ship is not believed to be serious. No decision has been made on whether the crew of 300 people, who left Halifax on Feb. 24, will be given shore leave before the ship is expected to head back to the Arabian Sea late next week.

The navy and air force said no decision had been made on replacing the aircraft.

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The Sea King, used for surveillance and detection, is considered a key element for the Iroquois in its new role as flagship for an international naval contingent in the Arabian Sea. There has been speculation that without the helicopter, the Iroquois might be removed as the command ship.

That could compound the international embarrassment suffered by military brass after the hovering helicopter crashed while preparing for a training mission.

The loss of the helicopter leaves a fleet of 28. But two Sea Kings are working in the Arabian Sea and five are on Canada's West Coast. Many of the helicopters on the East Coast are in hangars receiving maintenance and repair work. Others have been assigned duties.

Colonel David Martin, head of 12 Wing in CFB Shearwater, home of the helicopters, said Friday that the squadron's resources have been strained by the conflict in Afghanistan. He added that when the conflict broke out in 2001, the squadron was committed to having nine Sea Kings ready for duty, and now has 13 of the 40-year-old machines operating.

Col. Martin said a Sea King is being prepared to head to the Arabian Sea on board the frigate Fredericton next week, but he would not speculate on whether that aircraft might be moved to the Iroquois.

"We've got our efforts going into the Fredericton right now and getting it ready," Col. Martin said as maintenance staff worked on several Sea Kings in a Shearwater hangar Friday.

"When we look at putting another resource into the equation, we would have to look at the hours available and the impact that would have on our other commitments and the possible training required for additional crew."

He noted that a frigate was recently sent to the Arabian Sea from the West Coast without a helicopter because there was none available.

Speaking in Mexico, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien defended the Sea King and his government's decision in 1993 to cancel a contract to replace them.

"These helicopters are good helicopters," he said. "It was an accident. In 1993, we had \$42-billion of deficit. We could not afford to buy new helicopters at that time."

In the House of Commons Friday, the opposition attacked the government on the replacement delay.

"We face international embarrassment because our allies cannot even rely on our 40-year-old equipment," Canadian Alliance MP Deborah Grey said.

The air force wants to find Sea Kings to go overseas that have recently undergone major overhauls and are equipped with new engines and transmissions.

Captain Perry Comeau was to join the Iroquois overseas and relieve a Sea King helicopter pilot in late March. Now he is wondering about the future of the mission.

"It's a matter of the squadron deciding where I go and when I go, and that's all undecided at this point."

But Capt. Comeau and several other pilots and Sea King crew in the Shearwater hangar are anxious to head for their missions on the aged aircraft. They say the aircraft, which have been widely ridiculed as being unreliable and outdated, are safe and well maintained.

Captain Gary Nasmith, who served in the Persian Gulf on the helicopter that crashed, said mishaps can be expected in a fleet of helicopters that flies thousands of hours a year.

"We're certainly not embarrassed [by the Sea King crash]. We work very hard to fly it and we work very hard to maintain it and we take a lot of pride in getting the jobs we're tasked with done well."

In Ottawa, top military officers said the Sea Kings are safe and airworthy, and that the accident had nothing to do with the helicopter's age. They acknowledged, however, that the age of the Sea Kings means they need lots of repair and maintenance work between missions, which makes it harder to have them available quickly in an emergency.

Lieutenant-General Lloyd Campbell said the two engines on the Sea King had from 30 to 50 hours of flying time since their last maintenance. "Age is not an issue at all," he said. "Whether the aircraft is four years old or 40 years old doesn't make a difference if the problem has to do with a new engine."

He said there would be no move to ground the Sea Kings across Canada, although he acknowledged that the helicopters have been in heavy use in recent months.

"We're batting above our weight here, in the sense that we have been deploying more Sea Kings into the operational theatre than we're actually resourced for," Lt.-Gen. Campbell said.

Since their deployment in the Persian Gulf after the terror attacks in September, 2001, the Sea Kings have logged more than 5,000 hours.

"They're safe. I fly in them," Vice-Admiral Ron Buck said. "They have an excellent track record of safety over the number of years they've served."

He said the Canadian Forces need new helicopters because the aircraft will have additional sensor, radar and sonar capabilities.



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