

German military struggles with hardware problems

September 26 2014, by Frank Jordans



The Nov. 19, 2001 file photo shows German Navy soldiers standing beside a Sea Lynx helicopter on the air base Upjever, northwestern Germany. German military struggles with hardware problems. German defense officials have been left red-faced after a series of breakdowns delayed the first shipment of arms to Kurdish fighters in Iraq.(AP Photo/Joerg Sarbach, file)

(AP)—First a group of German army instructors got stranded in Bulgaria en route to Iraq when their plane malfunctioned.

Then the weapons they were meant to train Kurdish fighters to use got stuck in Germany because a Dutch military plane—brought in because no functioning German aircraft was available—broke down.

As other countries including the United States and France hit Islamic State targets in Syria and Iraq, Germany's army has struggled mightily to conduct the considerably more modest jobs it has taken on. It highlights how far behind other nations Europe's economic powerhouse is when it comes to projecting its military power.

The plane problems were a particular embarrassment for Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen, who had flown to the Kurdish city of Irbil on Thursday to witness the handover of the weapons. By the time Germany's first shipment of rifles, anti-tank weapons and ammunition arrived, she had met Kurdish leaders and left for home again.

German media have cited a confidential report, given to lawmakers on the parliamentary defense committee Wednesday, that listed a series of military hardware problems.

According to the media reports, only 24 out of 43 C-160 transport planes are currently available. The planes, developed 50 years ago, remain the workhorse of the Luftwaffe because their replacement, the Airbus A400M, has been delayed for several years.



On this picture made available on Sept. 26, 2014 German defense minister Ursula von der Leyen sits in a Transall C-160 of the German airforce during a visit to Erbil in northern Iraq. (AP Photo/pool, Maja Hitij)

The reports also say that just 42 of the Luftwaffe's 109 Eurofighter jets and 38 of its 89 Tornados are ready to fly. The navy acknowledged this week that it couldn't send any of its Sea Lynx helicopters to an international anti-piracy operation because of cracks in the tails.

Munich's daily Sueddeutsche Zeitung reported that 110 of the army's 180 Boxer armored transport vehicles are currently being repaired.

The defense ministry declined to confirm the reports, citing military secrecy. But ministry spokesman Ingo Gerhartz said the temporary sidelining of certain equipment didn't affect the army's overall capability.

"We're involved in 17 operations around the world," Gerhartz told reporters in Berlin on Friday. "We're fulfilling these operations every day, around the clock, at the weekend and on holidays."

But he conceded that the plane trouble had demonstrated how urgently Germany needs the A400M. "We need to improve in the area of air transport, we know that," said Gerhartz.

Former chief of staff Harald Kujat has said the German military's problems are partly due to chronic under-financing. In a bid to balance Germany's budget, the government reduced defense spending by about 800 million euros to 32.44 billion euros (\$41.30 billion) this year—far below NATO's recommended level of 2 percent of GDP.

The cuts have hit the military just as Germany seeks to develop a more active foreign policy. In recent months Germany has joined a campaign to support the fight against Islamic insurgents in Mali, stepped up air patrols on NATO's border in the Baltics, and offered to airlift medical equipment to Ebola-affected West Africa, all in addition to its ongoing involvement in Afghanistan and the Gulf of Aden.

"There's a number of individual events that perhaps would have been relatively low key if they'd occurred in a more benign background," said Ian Keddie, a defense analyst at IHS Jane's. "The Germans in many ways haven't been involved as much (as other nations) and this may be the highest tempo they've been at for a while."

Germany, which wants to become a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council, will send further weapons shipments to Iraq by chartering massive Antonov transport planes from Ruslan Salis, a Russian-Ukrainian company.

The plan has been criticized by some lawmakers because Western

governments including Germany have imposed sanctions against Russia over its support for separatists in eastern Ukraine.

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