

UK reveals Hermes UAV crash rate in Afghanistan

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10.25.2012

British Army operations involving leased Elbit Systems Hermes 450 tactical unmanned air vehicles have recorded 11 crashes in the past five years, armed forces minister Andrew Robathan has revealed.

"Since 2007 there have been 11 Hermes 450 crashes in Afghanistan," Robathan said in response to a parliamentary question on 24 October. No accidents involving the type occurred in the UK during the same time period, he added.

"An end-to-end review for army unmanned aerial systems training has recently been conducted, which reported at the end of September 2012," Robathan said. "As a result, several changes have already been made to increase airmanship standards in a number of areas, with further improvements to follow."

Royal Artillery regiments only use the roughly 550kg (1,210lb) air vehicle on operations, but the army intends to conduct future training activities in the UK with its successor Watchkeeper system. An extensive redevelopment of the Israeli-produced Hermes 450, this is being supplied by Thales UK/Elbit joint venture company UTacS.

Contracted via Thales UK, the Ministry of Defence's interim arrangement to use leased UAVs has been extended while the Watchkeeper's introduction to service has suffered repeated schedule slips. More than 60,000 flight hours had been logged with Hermes 450s over Afghanistan and also previously Iraq under the urgent operational requirement service by early this year. The aircraft carries an electro-optical/infrared sensor payload to provide intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance cover.

A date of late 2012 has previously been referred to for the Watchkeeper system's debut use in Afghanistan, but efforts are now being focused on achieving full civil certification before this milestone will be met. Each new air vehicle to enter use under the programme will undergo flight trials from the ParcAberporth test centre in west Wales, with this activity due to conclude during 2015.