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Grounded Taipan helicopters already stripped for parts, Australia tells Ukraine

Andrew Probyn

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Australia has refused Ukraine's request to donate its retired fleet of Taipan helicopters, saying it is not feasible to return them to flying condition.

In a blow to Ukraine's bid to bolster its air defences, Australia's 45 Taipan MRH-90 aircraft will instead continue to be dismantled, stripped for spare parts and then buried in an undisclosed defence site.

With Defence Minister Richard Marles on leave, his stand-in, Pat Conroy, has been under pressure to explain why Australia is pursuing its so-called "disposal strategy" for the MRH-90s a month after being asked to donate them to the war against Vladimir Putin's Russia.



An Australian Army MRH-90 Taipan in Queensland, before the fleet was grounded in September.

“None of the aircraft are currently in flying condition and it is not feasible to return the aircraft to an operational state,” Conroy said.

“The Australian government continues to work closely with Ukraine to consider further options to provide timely, meaningful, and sustainable assistance.”

The Australian Defence Force retired its fleet of Taipans in September, two months after one of the European-designed helicopters crashed in Queensland, killing four military officers: Lieutenant Maxwell Nugent, Captain Danniell Lyon, Corporal Alexander Naggs and Warrant Officer Joseph Phillip Laycock.

Conroy said the department immediately began a “disposal strategy” for the Taipans, to firstly find would-be buyers for the trouble-prone choppers. Defence then worked with Airbus to find potential customers interested in buying the airframes.

He said that when no buyer could be found for the aircraft or airframes, the next step in their disposal began - disassembly and sale of the spare parts.

Defence has not revealed how many of the MRH-90s have already been broken up and buried, or how many remain complete but mothballed – if any.

The chief of Defence Intelligence of Ukraine, Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov, wrote to Defence Minister Richard Marles on December 17, formally asking Australia to donate the choppers.

“Our wounded are dying unnecessarily on the front because we cannot get them from the front to emergency care fast enough,” he told Marles.

“The odds of surviving a critical injury in war are substantially increased with helicopter medevacs. We do not have helicopters that can rapidly deploy and evacuate our wounded.”



Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov, Ukraine's military intelligence chief. AP

Budanov noted in the letter that Ukraine had studied the reasons for Australia retiring the Taipans.

“As a result we now understand the challenges Australia faced,” he wrote. “However, we are confident we can mitigate those challenges by creating a NH90 maintenance hub supported by France and others who currently maintain these helicopters in other countries.

“Ukraine is thirteen times smaller than Australia, which allows us to create a single defended maintenance hub, similar to the New Zealand NH90 operations.

“On behalf of the Defence Intelligence Agency of Ukraine, I would like to formally ask Australia for a donation of the retired MRH-90 Taipan helicopters as these aircraft will save

Ukrainian lives by providing urgently needed medevac capabilities.”

Conroy replied to Budanov on Thursday, advising him that it is not feasible to return the aircraft to operational state.

The acting defence minister has also offered a briefing to ambassador Vasyl Myroshnychenko, who also formally requested the Taipans be sent to his war-torn country.

Strategic Analysis Australia defence analyst Peter Jennings said the decision to break up the Taipans for spare parts and bury them was “crazy”.

“This is the dumbest government decision I’ve seen since we leased the Port of Darwin to a Chinese company for 99 years,” Jennings said.

“How on earth can this be best value for money when on the second-hand market, those helicopters are worth about a billion dollars?”

Jennings noted that more than a dozen other countries were flying Taipans, including New Zealand, France, Germany and the Netherlands.

”If the government really thinks the helicopter is dangerous, why hasn’t it taken that message to the dozen other countries that are operating the Taipan around the world?”

Stefan Romaniw, the co-chair of the Australian Federation of Ukrainian Organisations, said his home country need the Taipans to win “to win this war”.

“They are required with speed,” Romaniw said, demanding an inquiry into why Defence had made its decision to dismantle and bury the helicopters – a call echoed by shadow defence minister Andrew Hastie.

“The government needs to explain why they have not been prepared to send these Taipans to Ukraine,” Hastie said, adding that safety concerns were an insufficient reason. “The risk threshold of war is different to that of peace,” he said.

Andrew Probyn is National Affairs Editor for Nine News.

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