

Ukraine turns eyes to France for help

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LABOR KNOCK-BACK 'STRANGE'

JOE KELLY

EXCLUSIVE

Ukraine is turning its search for helicopters to France after the Albanese government formally declined its request for a donation of Australia's retired fleet of MRH-90 Taipans, warning Kyiv the aircraft posed "unacceptable levels of risk" to defence personnel.

Ukrainian ambassador Vasyly Myroshnychenko told The Weekend Australian that the Ukrainian government was also "working with the French manufacturer and French government to see whether they can pursue those aircraft within Europe" to assist the war effort against Russia.

Defence experts were perplexed on Friday by the government's decision to knock back the Ukrainian request, with former chief of army from 2002 to 2008 and Canberra University professor Peter Leahy saying it was "very strange".

The Taipans were permanently grounded last year after an MRH-90 helicopter plunged into the ocean off the Whitsunday Islands on July 28, killing four

Australians during the Talisman Sabre joint military exercises with the US. The investigation into the cause of the crash continues, but Acting Defence Minister Pat Conroy revealed on Thursday that none of the aircraft remained in a flying condition. He said it was "not feasible" to return them to an operational state.

But Mr Leahy, a former army general, told The Weekend Australian: "If anybody needs help it's the Ukrainians. This would seem to be a very good opportunity to support them."

"There must be some work that could be done on them."

"I understand that one of the problems is that they've been so highly modified to meet the Australian preferences and conditions that they wouldn't fit easily into another nation's fleet. But Ukraine has a dire need for them."

"And I think it would have just been purposeful to support Ukraine in this way."

Mr Leahy said it was "hard to understand" how it was possible that none of the helicopters were in a flying condition.

The Weekend Australian has confirmed that Mr Conroy told the Ukrainians in his letter

declining their request for the Taipans that the aircraft were not safe.

"It is the Australian government's view that the helicopters cannot be operated without unacceptable levels of risk to defence personnel," he said.

However, opposition defence spokesman Andrew Hastie has argued that the "risk profile for operations in war where you are fighting for national survival is entirely different to a peacetime army". "We should be giving as much support as we can to the Ukrainians," he said. "If we are applying peace time standards to a war where people are fighting for their survival, we are making a big mistake."

Mr Hastie told the ABC on Friday that the government did not need to send all 45 Taipans to Ukraine and instead send "a number" that would still be able to make a difference.

"The Defence Industry Minister, Pat Conroy, has already talked about the cost of doing a decommission where the helicopters go to Ukraine. I'm not satisfied with the cost argument," he said. "We don't have to send all 45."

"This goes to a deeper question: is the Defence Department running our defence and foreign policy? They should have provided options to the government and if they've jumped the gun here and dismantled these aircraft so that the government does not have the option of sending, that's also a problem."

The Australian revealed on Thursday that Kyiv's official written request for the aircraft – dated December 17 – stated that the helicopters would "save Ukrainian lives" and prevent the wounded from "dying unnecessarily" on the frontline by providing a much needed medevac capability.

The letter also made clear that Ukraine had established a taskforce to "research and understand the reasons why Australia retired the MRH-90 Taipans" and that Kyiv, as a result, now understood the "challenges Australia faced".



Myroshnychenko

NATIONAL AFFAIRS EDITOR

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PETER LEAHY
FORMER CHIEF OF ARMY

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