

DND looks at buying light tanks to replace battered Afghan fleet

By Murray Brewster – 3 hours ago

OTTAWA — The Defence Department wants to buy at least 20 tracked armoured vehicles within the next two years to relieve pressure on the army, whose fleet has been pounded by the war in Afghanistan.

The proposal, which officials are trying to get through cabinet, is one component of an expected \$4-billion overhaul of the military's combat vehicle fleet, defence sources said Monday.

The army currently uses light armoured vehicles known as LAV IIIs, eight-wheeled fighting vehicles armed with a 25 mm cannon.

Although agile and quick-handling on roads and solid ground, the army has found LAVs often get stuck in boggy ground along riverbeds where the Taliban have increasingly chosen to stage ambushes.

One of the vehicles under serious consideration is the CV90, which is essentially a light tank that's capable of carrying troops, according to defence sources.

In terms of size and firepower, the BAE Systems vehicle falls in between the LAV III and the 64-tonne Leopard tank.

The British defence giant is offering Canadian industry the opportunity to build the turret and other components for the CV90.

The 32-tonne iron monster - with a 35 mm cannon and crew of three - affords roughly the same level of protection as a Leopard tank, which has thus far survived strikes by ever-increasing Taliban roadside bombs.

The war in Kandahar has taken a huge toll on both the army's armoured vehicles and stock of spare parts, says the army's current strategic assessment.

"Battle damage has eliminated various stocks from the Whole Fleet Management system," said the 2009-10 review, penned by Lt.-Gen. Andrew Leslie, chief of land staff, and obtained by The Canadian Press.

"Procurement and (management system) did not adequately take vehicle casualties into account."

Leslie recently told the Senate's committee on security and defence that the out-of-service rate for some vehicles across the entire army is running around 70 per cent.

In testimony Monday before the Senate committee, the Defence Department's assistant deputy minister for materiel said the alarming assessment was only a "snapshot in time."

Dan Ross, a former brigadier-general, said in some cases the absence of maintenance technicians has hampered returning damaged vehicles to the road.

"The vehicles are being used hard," he testified.

As many as 70 of the army's LAV IIIs are brought back to Canada each year for a major "reset" and come out of the overhaul "brand new," said Ross.

Still, the Defence Department is planning a major upgrade to its light armoured vehicle fleet. That includes the possible purchase of a newer, larger version of the LAV - dubbed the LAV-H.

That project would help the country's economy since the contract would go to General Dynamics Land Systems, which has an assembly line in London, Ont., and refurbishment factory in Edmonton.

A second pillar of the plan would be an upgrade to the army's 1960s-vintage M113 armoured personnel carriers.

Ross also told the Senate committee that contracts will soon be released to upgrade used Leopard 2A4 tanks purchased from the Netherlands last year.

The army borrowed 20 state-of-the-art Leopard A6M tanks from Germany for the Afghan mission and promised to return them. But Ross said that those vehicles will be replaced by equivalent tanks purchased from the Dutch.

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