



Jane's Defence Weekly

Japan approves Osprey deployment to Okinawa

Copyright © IHS Global Limited, 2012

Japan approves Osprey deployment to Okinawa

Publication:

Jane's Defence Weekly 2012

Author:

James Hardy

,London

Kosuke Takahashi

,Tokyo

Section:

ASIA PACIFIC

Countries:

Japan

United States

Last posted:

2012-09-19

Japan has agreed to allow the start of US Marine Corps MV-22 Osprey flight operations in the country.

The decision, which was announced by the Pentagon and the Japanese Ministry of Defence, ends months of delay caused by public opposition to the Bell-Boeing platform's deployment to Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in Okinawa Prefecture.

The tilt-rotor MV-22 is replacing CH-46 Sea Knight helicopters at Futenma and will provide a sea change in capabilities, Pentagon spokesman George Little said. "With twice the speed, three times the payload and four times the range, the Osprey will make a major contribution to upgrading the capabilities of the alliance."



1454324

Twelve MV-22 Ospreys arrived on the Japanese mainland in July.(PA Photos)

The aircraft have been based at Marine Air Station Iwakuni in Yamaguchi Prefecture since arriving in Japan in July. The Japanese official in charge of Japan-US defence co-operation told

IHS Jane's

that shakedown flights would start by the end of the week "if the weather permits", after which the Ospreys will be moved from the mainland to Okinawa. Japanese Defence Minister Satoshi Morimoto said operational flights in Okinawa would start after the middle of October.

This schedule may prove optimistic. When Morimoto asked the mayor of Iwakuni and governor of Yamaguchi on 19 September for their agreement to the start of Osprey flights at the base there he was rebuffed because of concerns about the aircraft's safety record.

The MV-22's deployment to Japan was delayed originally by investigations into two Osprey crashes earlier in 2012 - in Morocco and Florida - that left two Marines dead and five injured.

"We have confirmed that the two accidents were caused by human factors and not by systemic or technical problems with the aircraft," Morimoto said in a joint press conference with Foreign Minister Koichiro Gamba.

"We have confirmed the Osprey's operational safety and, on the premise that maximum consideration will be given to the public, we have decided to allow the United States to start operating it," Morimoto added.

As well as the recent crashes, opponents cite the aircraft's troubled development, during which 30 people died in flight tests or training accidents, and Futenma's location in a built-up area. Protestors also point to the August 2004 crash of a USMC CH-53D Sea Stallion on the campus of Okinawa International University in which three crew members were injured. According to the prefectural government, 18 aircraft based at Futenma have crashed since Japan regained sovereignty over Okinawa in 1972.

Okinawa governor Hirokazu Nakaima told reporters he did not want the Osprey in Okinawa at all. "I cannot allay fears about the aircraft and I cannot feel any sincerity from the central government about it," he said.



COMMENT

The Osprey has become a politically charged symbol of Okinawan sensitivity to the US military presence on the island chain and the planned relocation of Futenma to an offshore facility in northern Okinawa island.

However, the strategic importance to Washington and Tokyo of the island chain, as shown by its status as home to the only forward deployed USMC Marine Expeditionary Unit, makes it almost impossible for either government to back down.

Officials are also keen to play up the Osprey's substantial operational benefits over the CH-46, pointing out that its combat radius of 600 km allows it to fly to and from the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyutai islands from Futenma. It can also fly to Yonaguni island, Japan's westernmost island, which is set to become the location for a new Japan Ground Self-Defence Force radar station.

Copyright © IHS Global Limited, 2012