

Richard Marles ignores Kyiv plea for helicopters



[One of the MRH-90 helicopters Kyiv has asked for. Picture: ADF](#)

EXCLUSIVE, [JOE KELLY](#), NATIONAL AFFAIRS EDITOR

UPDATED 6:28AM JANUARY 18, 2024, FIRST PUBLISHED AT 10:35PM JANUARY 17, 2024

Kyiv has implored the Albanese government to help “save Ukrainian lives” and prevent the wounded from “dying unnecessarily” on the frontline by [donating its fleet of retired MRH-90 Taipan helicopters](#) to assist the war effort – instead of [dismantling and burying them](#).

The Australian has obtained the official December 17 request to Defence Minister Richard Marles made by Lieutenant General Kyrilo Budanov, chief of the Defence Intelligence of [Ukraine](#), in which he said the helicopters would provide a much-needed medevac capability and “dramatically increase the survivability of our frontline defenders”.

Despite the request being made one month ago, Mr Marles, who is also the Deputy Prime Minister, has not yet responded to the [Ukrainians](#).

Defence Industry Minister Pat Conroy also said this week that it would be “irresponsible for us to move away from the disposal strategy that we’ve locked on in”.

In his letter, General Budanov said “our wounded are dying unnecessarily on the front because we cannot get them from the front to emergency care fast enough.

“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,” he said.

READ MORE: [Decision to bury Taipans dents our support of Ukraine](#) | [Taipans’ grounding ‘leaves us vulnerable to natural disasters’](#) |

“This year (2023) Australia announced that it would cease all flying operations with the NH Industries [MRH-90 Taipan helicopters](#). These retired systems could dramatically increase the survivability of our frontline defenders,” he said.

“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.”

[Read General Budanov’s letter](#)

General Budanov also revealed that he had established a taskforce to “research and understand the reasons why Australia retired the MRH-90 Taipans” and that Ukraine, as a result, now understood the “challenges Australia faced”.

“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,” he said. “Ukraine is 13 times smaller than Australia which allows us to create a single defended maintenance hub similar to the New Zealand NH90 operations.

“In addition to the helicopters, we hope you will also be open to sharing your knowledge of the aircraft so we can successfully deploy the MRH-90 Taipans to evacuate our wounded.”

Mr Marles’ office said that Australia was standing with the government of Ukraine “in support of its sovereignty and territorial integrity, in the face of Russia’s illegal and immoral invasion.”



[Ukrainian Lieutenant General Kyrylo](#)

[Budanov.](#)

“Australia remains one of the largest non-NATO contributors of military assistance to Ukraine,” Mr Marles’ office told The Australian. “We continue to work with Ukraine about support which will make a difference and allow them to resolve this conflict on their own terms.”

On Tuesday, Mr Conroy said the government made the right decision to “immediately ground the MRH-90 fleet after the tragic accident in Queensland”.

“We immediately began a disposal strategy for the MRH-90s,” he said. “It will require considerable taxpayers’ money and time to get those aircraft back into flying conditions.”

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.

Defence has already started executing a disposal strategy for the 45 decommissioned helicopters, including contacting other users to gauge interest in purchasing whole aircraft. Mr Conroy said there was “no interest”.

The Taipans were designed and built by NH Industries – a consortium of European companies involving Airbus Helicopters, Leonardo Helicopters, and Fokker – and were based on the NH90 Troop Transport Helicopter variant.

Australia has experienced a series of problems with the Taipans ranging from “chronic” spare parts shortages to issues with doors and rotors. In 2020, the helicopters had their flying hours cut by 46 per cent.

Defence also revealed an issue with the MRH-90s cabin doors, which were too narrow to allow a door gun to be permanently mounted and still allow troops to jump out of the aircraft in combat zones.

Defence is currently working with Airbus Australia Pacific and NH Industries to harvest key spares from the MRH-90 fleet for the use of other NH90 operators. This work, which involves disassembly of the aircraft, commenced in October last year.

THEAUSTRALIAN.COM.AU00:30

Defence dismantles Taipan helicopter fleet

The Defence Force has reportedly begun dismantling its grounded fleet of Army MRH-90 Taipan... helicopters. According to the 'Asia Pacific Defence Reporter' (APDR), the decision was signed off in secret to destroy them rather than try to sell them. The publication suggests some expensive components such as gear boxes are [More](#)

Other aircraft parts are to be “disposed of in an environmentally conscious manner”, with the request from Ukraine coming after the disassembly of the helicopters had already begun.

Sources working with the Ukrainian task force, established in October, told The Australian the helicopters could save thousands of lives and represented a “gamechanger” in the war effort. They said plans were already being implemented to ensure that Ukraine could quickly train its pilots to use the new helicopters if Australia agreed to the request.

“We are hoping the French will receive the helicopters and certify them and refurbish them,” one source told The Australian.

“We are really hoping we can get five airlifted as soon as possible to France and get the pilots starting to go through them.”

The Australian also understands that individuals working in support of the Ukrainian task force have already met with Australian mechanics and pilots – on the promise of anonymity – to discuss their experiences and opinions of the helicopter.

The Australian was informed the commander of the NH90 task force himself had experience flying the NH90, and Kyiv was hopeful that European users of the helicopter could help share the burden of training-up Ukrainian pilots quickly.

The Ukrainian ambassador to Australia, Vasyl Myroshnychenko, told The Australian that the “primary purpose of using them (the Taipans) was for rescue missions and medevacs”.

He also confirmed there had been no formal response from the Australian government to the Ukrainian request.