

Defense News

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Raven UAVs on Loan To British Army in Iraq

ANDREW CHUTER, LONDON

U.S. Army Raven mini unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) are being loaned to the British Army to improve the protection of their forces operating in southern Iraq.

Five of the Raven systems, each of which includes three aircraft and other equipment, are being deployed with British forces, with one now in operation. A statement by the Ministry of Defence here said the loan included "manpower and equipment," and that British military personnel had "teamed up with the U.S. Army."

That suggests the Aerovironment-built Raven may be operated at least initially by joint British-U.S. teams. The MoD was unable to comment by press time Oct. 6 on what U.S. manpower involvement entailed.

UAV cooperation would be nothing new for the coalition partners. They already collaborate in a U.S. Air Force-Royal Air Force team operating the more sophisticated Predator UAV. Although the personnel are based in the United States, the vehicles provide surveillance and offensive capability over Iraq and Afghanistan.

The U.S. government last week requested congressional approval to sell the British two Predator Bs and a ground station to support forces involved in fighting the Taliban in southern Afghanistan.

The British also have been looking for a tactical UAV to use as an interim measure until the Thales UK Watchkeeper system -- using an Elbit Hermes 450 vehicle -- comes into service starting in 2010. The remaining Phoenix systems in use are due to start going out of service soon.

The Raven is a far more humble vehicle than the Predator, providing over-the-hill intelligence for foot patrols and other forces up to battle group level using tiny infrared and thermal imaging and video cameras.

The hand-launched man-portable UAVs have a range of about 10 kilometers and an endurance of between 60 and 90 minutes, providing imagery to ground control or remote viewing stations.

The MoD acquired four Lockheed Martin-built Desert Hawk systems in 2004 to meet an urgent operational requirement for local force protection in Iraq. But it ceased using the mini UAV several months ago, as it was found to be unsuitable. British forces deployed to Afghanistan continue to use the Desert Hawk.