

## **Military aircrafts trapped in 'death spiral'?**

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Yet again, the Indonesian Air Force has been forced to decommission one aircraft following an accident that involved one C-130 Hercules transport aircraft.

The aircraft, carrying 14 crew members and 98 passengers, crashed into houses and slid into a paddy field in Magetan, East Java on May 19, 2009. So far, 98 people have been reported dead.

Considering the number of fatalities, the Hercules accident is the second worst accident in the history of Air force after the Oct. 5, 1991 accident that killed 136 people. The accident is also the second to involve Hercules aircraft in the past two weeks.

Indonesian commercial airplanes have also recorded at least 22 deadly accidents throughout 2005-2009 that forced the European Union to place a ban on Indonesian flights. However, the Hercules accident may only be the tip of iceberg of problems pertaining to the aging defence equipments in TNI.

The Hercules accident marked the 12th military aircraft-related accidents since 2005, which involved at least 51 deadly fatalities. Just last month, a Fokker F-27 Friendship 400M crashed in Bandung and killed 17 Air Force Special Forces trainees and their instructors along with six crews.

There are various assumptions lingering as to the cause of the high number of military aircraft accidents.

The first is the lack of funds to replace old aircraft, or to be exact, a lack of political will to modernize military aircraft. Indonesia's defence budget has been constantly less than 1 percent of the country's total budget for the past year. In 2008, only 33 percent of the defence budget was used for development, of which some 83 percent was made available in form of export credit.

In 2006 Defense Minister Juwono Sudarsono said transport vehicles would be the government's procurement priority, and would account for 70 percent of procurement funding.

However, there has been no action made towards any procurement for fixed-wing transport aircraft. Efforts to carry on the procurement plan have been hampered by the lack of funds.

Moreover, in the implementation, the government switched the procurement priority from transport aircraft to fighting aircraft and helicopters from Russia mainly because the procurement can be funded by using export credit.

The second is the lack of spare parts, which is blamed on the US military embargo between 1999 and 2005. The embargo had crippled Indonesia's air power not only because majority of Indonesian aircraft is imported from US, but fighters from other countries also use US technology, which was also covered in the ban.

The US lifted the embargo and resumed the sales of lethal and non-lethal defence articles to Indonesia in the middle of 2005.

Although bilateral relations between Indonesia and US have improved as Indonesia has been a major beneficiary of the US military assistance program for the last five years, there has been debate whether Indonesia should continue import weapons from the US to avoid the likelihood of political strings attached to the sales.

According to the Center for Defense Information, Indonesia started to use the foreign military sales scheme in 2006, possibly to procure caterpillar diesel machine from the US to modernize some ex-German corvettes and frigates.

However, the hesitation to resume defence trade for transport aircraft remains in place until now, and has not been complemented with diversification to other suppliers.

One thing for sure, Indonesian Air Force is facing the "death spiral" problem due to its ageing fleets. According to RAND, "death spiral" refers to a cycle in which older equipment require more funds to maintain, which, in turn, decreases available funds for any new weapons system.

In the case of Indonesian Air Force, "death spiral" becomes literally defined not only in terms of budget pressure but also fatalities.

In 2007, Indonesian Air Force has some 48 transport aircraft of various kinds, with readiness as low as 50 percent. This year, the iceberg of ageing fleets issue will be imminent as there will be one squadron of Lockheed C-130B Hercules, one squadron of Fokker F-27, one squadron of Bell-47G Solov helicopter, one squadron of AS202 Bravo and T-34C helicopter, as well as one squadron of Sikorsky S-58 helicopter need to be decommissioned. Disposing these aircraft indisputably will result in a big gap in the current military capability.

The remaining question is what government is going to do with the ageing aircraft if it does not want the capability gap to exist. Is the government going to continue using these aircraft despite the risks, or upgrade or decommission them?

There is a significant correlation between aircrafts' age and cost of maintenance, in which aircraft maintenance cost increase as fleets age.

This applies not only to commercial but also to military aircraft, and may even worsen in military aircraft because the frequency and scale of deployment and operation van heighten the effect of age to maintenance cost.

Calculating the correlation of age and cost of maintenance of an aircraft would help the Indonesian government to take decisions whether they should continue using their aging aircraft, upgrade or decommission the aircraft.

If the government cannot procure new aircraft, leasing or contracting a similar capability should be taken into consideration. If this issue continues without any significant action, the Indonesian Air Force (as well other services that use old aircraft) will face multiple problems.

In addition to the increasing maintenance cost, ageing aircraft will also present depleting readiness that eventually affects the military readiness as a whole. Even worse, this problem may affect the morale of TNI soldiers.

Although it is not always a decisive factor, equipment is one of physical components in

military operation that increases the likelihood of successful operation. As Adam Smith said, "defense is state's primary obligation", therefore it is the state's responsibility to equip its armed forces with the best equipment it can afford.