

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

April 26, 2017

The Honorable James Mattis  
Secretary of Defense  
U.S. Department of Defense  
1400 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, D.C. 20301

Dear Secretary Mattis:

We write to bring your attention to our grave concern regarding continued delays to modernize the UH-1N "Huey" helicopter fleet that protects our critical inter-continental ballistic missile (ICBM) sites and performs the continuity of government mission for the National Capitol Region (NCR). The U.S. Air Force's UH-1N replacement program has been identified as deficient since 2001. The average age of the UH-1N is more than 40 years, and continues to operate under national security waivers because it is incapable of meeting requirements for speed, range, payload, armament, and survivability. Given this situation and STRATCOM's repeated urgings to address it, we urge you to do everything you can to expedite the fielding of new helicopters that can support these critical missions.

Last spring, the Air Force finally took action on former STRATCOM Commander Admiral Cecil D. Haney's urgent calls to replace the ailing Huey. The Air Force determined that the only way to quickly meet this crucial requirement was to use the Economy Act to enable rapid fielding of new helicopters. The Air Force's urgent and compelling need for replacement was buttressed by STRATCOM's request for forces (RFF) to use Army UH-60s to provide a temporary replacement to protect our ICBM sites until new helicopters could be fielded. The House and Senate Armed Services and Appropriations Committees supported these efforts. However, the Office of the Secretary of Defense overruled the Air Force's acquisition approach by announcing that the Air Force would conduct an open competition for the UH-1N replacement in May 2016.

While we support open competition, we are extremely concerned that the Department of Defense's on-again off-again series of programs to modernize this critical capability will lead to continuing delays and another opportunity to short-change STRATCOM's requirements. While short-term mitigating efforts have been taken, Air Force Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, Lieutenant General Mark C. Nowland, testified before the Senate Armed Services Airland Subcommittee last month that these mitigation efforts are "a Band-Aid type solution. We need new aircraft for [the] mission."

By the Air Force's own admission, the current acquisition strategy adds years to the time it will take to field a replacement for the UH-1Ns when the Air Force could be fielding helicopters sooner that will meet requirements by capitalizing on existing military helicopter

production lines. Further delays have been compounded by news in February that the Air Force's anticipated request for proposal for the UH-1N replacement program that was to be released at the end of February will not occur until the summer of 2017. This in turn delays delivery of the first operational helicopters by over a year – from the first quarter of fiscal year 2020 to the second quarter of fiscal year 2021. At a time when our nation faces unprecedented threats, we can ill afford to prolong security vulnerabilities any longer than necessary.

Just this month, the Commander of STRATCOM, General John E. Hyten, testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee about his frustration with the pace of the replacement program. He said, "Of all the things in my portfolio, I can't even describe how upset I get about the helicopter replacement program. It's a helicopter, for gosh sakes. We ought to be able to go out and buy a helicopter and put it in the hands of the people that need it. And we should be able to do that quickly. We've been building combat helicopters for a long time in this country. I don't understand why the heck it is so hard to buy a helicopter." We could not agree more with General Hyten. He rescinded the RFF precisely because he wanted the Air Force to focus all of its resources and attention on fielding the replacements helicopters now.


And it is not just the STRATCOM Commander who is concerned. Our offices have heard directly from operators currently executing the UH-1N ICBM and NCR missions. They unanimously tell us that their top priority is receiving a replacement aircraft capable of fulfilling mission requirements.


Delays to fielding a replacement are unacceptable to the war fighter and our security. We urge you ensure this vital program receives your full attention. Thank you for your consideration and we look forward to working with you on this urgent matter.


Sincerely,

  
RICHARD BLUMENTHAL  
United States Senate

  
ROSA L. DELAURO  
Member of Congress

  
TOM COTTON  
United States Senate


  
JON TESTER  
United States Senate


  
CHRISTOPHER S. MURPHY  
United States Senate

  
HEIDI HEITKAMP  
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