

U.S. Still Interested In Brazilian Military Aircraft

Jenny Barchfield, Associated Press

RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) — The United States is still interested in the Brazilian-made Super Tucano light aircraft, a top State Department official said Thursday, days after the U.S. Air Force said it was rescinding a \$354 million contract for such aircraft.

Deputy Secretary of State William Burns said the U.S. "is in the midst of some internal processes" related to the deal for 20 light air-support aircraft by Brazil's Embraer.

"We're still interested," he said during a speech on U.S.-Brazil relations. "Sometimes we strain people's patience with our internal processes but that doesn't change the reality that I think Embraer has a lot to offer."

Burns declined to provide any details on the processes or give a timetable for completion, saying only he hoped the issue would be resolved as soon as possible.

The U.S. Air Force said recently it planned to rescind a contract for the Super Tucanos and open an investigation into the awarding of the deal, saying it was not satisfied with documentation supporting the decision to buy the aircraft.

Wichita, Kansas-based Hawker Beechcraft Corp. had challenged the awarding of the contract to Embraer and its American partner, claiming its own AT-6 aircraft was wrongly excluded from the selection process. Nevada-based Sierra Nevada Corp. was given the contract in December and was to work with Embraer, which makes the Super Tucano.

The contract for 20 of the single-engine turboprops, which would support security efforts in Afghanistan, could end up being worth nearly \$1 billion, depending on future orders.

Brazil's foreign ministry released a statement saying the government was surprised to learn of the suspension.

"This development is not considered conducive to strengthening relations between the countries on defense affairs," the statement said.

Burns told reporters in Rio that he saw no connection between the conflict over the Super Tucanos and a bid by U.S. airplane manufacturer Boeing Co. to sell the Brazilian Air Force 36 of its F-18 fighter jets.

"They are two separate issues," he said, adding that's Boeing's offer to provide a full transfer of technology to Brazil if it wins the \$5 billion contract was "the best of the available packages."

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"It's exactly the same kind of package that we offer to our closest NATO partners," Burns said.

In addition to Boeing's bid, Brazil is also studying offers from Sweden's Saab AB for its Gripen NG fighter jet and France's Dassault for its Rafale jet. A decision has been long delayed due to budget cuts, but local media reports indicate a decision may come soon.

Burns is on a two-day trip to Brazil.

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