Golden Times

Safran was able to surpass its 5% sales growth target for last year, booking a 5.9% increase in sales over 2006. But more important to its future, the aerospace company says it has fully hedged its 2008 dollar exposure. Safran had been criticized for not hedging aggressively enough. Sales growth was largely driven by aerospace propulsion, where orders in the CFM International joint venture with General Electric reached a record 2,704 CFM56s. Helicopter engine orders hit 1,055. Sales for the entire division were up 16.7% to 65.9 billion ($87.8 billion). Defense security also enjoyed strong growth, posting a 7.1% increase. Aerospace equipment grew more modestly, at 2.2%, while the commercial communications side, from which Safran is trying to extricate itself, continues to suffer, posting a 31.5% decline in sales. Company debt fell to a mere €160 million from €419 million.

Investment Authorized

Russia has given the long-awaited OK for Italy’s Alenia Aeronautica to take a 25% stake in the Sukhoi Civil Aircraft Co., now developing the Superjet 100 regional jet. The holding comes with a single share above the 25% threshold, giving Alenia the control it sought. But the special status also required a dispensation from President Vladimir Putin, because it breaches Russia’s foreign ownership limits. With the arrangement expected to be approved this summer, Alenia gets to name two of seven SCAC board members. SCAC will receive nearly $190 million directly, although Alenia’s total program outlay will be $370 million, some of which is earmarked for activities in Italy. Alenia will have a 51% stake in the Superjet joint venture, to be based in Venice;

failure simulation software for the aircraft, the first of which is to be modernized in 2008. The kits, which will include a central control unit, head-up display, air-air and air-surface fire control and GPS/inertial guidance systems, will be installed by the French air force at its facility in Clermont-Ferrand, Auvergne.

Fired Up

Italy plans to spend €100 million this year to increase its aerial firefighting fleet. The country operates Bombardier 415 amphibians and has been closely evaluating the Russian Beriev Be-200. Type selection is pending. The European Union would like to see member states integrate fleets, an idea that is likely to be tested this year in a series of exercises. Italian Civil Protection chief, Guido Bertolaso, says the country is pursuing a two-part approach. On the one hand, it is setting up an “integrated rapid intervention force” to respond to crises; on the other, it is working with France, Spain and Portugal (Greece is to join soon) on an EU-wide firefighting initiative. The southern European nations already cooperate, most notably during the firestorm season. One of the main objectives of the EU-wide effort is to standardize operational procedures.

Killer Bees As Relays

The U.S. Marines have demonstrated they can use Swift Engineering’s Killer Bee tactical UAVs as communications relays to link remote, separated ground units. The fourth-generation vehicles were configured in the field with relay payloads based on Enhanced Position Locating Reporting System, SecNet II and MeshNet that provided data, voice, video and command capabilities in rugged terrain. Two UAVs were deployed sequentially to provide over-the-horizon comms.

Alphajet Enhancement

Armanments agency DGA has contracted with Thales and Sabca of Belgium to perform a partial modernization of 20 Alphajets operated by France’s advanced fighter training school. The upgrade is intended to enable pilots at the facility, which serves the French and Belgian air forces, to transition more easily to front-line fighters like the Rafale and F-16 MLU until Europe can agree on a new advanced trainer. Under a €22.6-million ($34-million) arrangement, Thales and Sabca will develop, qualify and supply navigation/attack system retrofit kits and corresponding