

Air Force welcomes newest recruit

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Major General Mohammed bin Swaidan Saeed al Gamzi of the UAE Air Force speaks during a handing off ceremony of the first of six C-17 Globemaster III airlifters at Long Beach Airport. Kevork Djansezian / Getty Images / AFP

Built to land on the short gravel runways of Afghanistan and able to carry a 61-tonne Abrams tank in its belly, the C-17 is one of the most rough-and-ready military cargo planes in the skies.

And last week it joined the UAE Air Force after an inauguration ceremony at the Boeing's assembly line in Long Beach, California.

As workers jubilantly waved Emirates and US flags, the top brass from the UAE Armed Forces were on hand to take delivery of a jumbo jet that will project the nation's image further.

Major Gen Staff Pilot Mohammed bin Suwaidan Saeed al Qamzi, the UAE Air Force and Air Defence commander, says the planes will "help expand our ability to perform humanitarian and strategic-lift missions in the region and around the world".

With six of the planes on order, costing an estimated US\$191 million (Dh701.5m) each, final deliveries next year will make the UAE the world's third-largest operator of the aircraft after the US and UK, with one more than Australia.

The UAE will use the cargo planes for missions to areas stricken by floods, earthquakes and other natural disasters.

Qatar has two of the jets and one often used in aid missions has been painted in the livery of Qatar Airways.

Its first mission was in January last year when it flew supplies to earthquake-ravaged Haiti. Two months later it delivered supplies after an earthquake in Chile.

The UAE is keen on this type of humanitarian focus, says Dan Darling, a Middle East defence analyst at Forecast International in the US.

"The UAE wants to increase its humanitarian efforts, which by doing so bolsters their diplomatic and soft-power profile," Mr Darling says.

The planes are also designed for strategic airlift to move troops, equipment and material over long distances, which could include support for the UAE's squadron of fighter jets that is helping to enforce the no-fly zone over Libya.

For nearly a decade, the UAE has maintained a peacekeeping force in Afghanistan that has been well received by the Afghan public.

"At first, I thought these were American soldiers and I wanted them to leave," a young Afghan man told the BBC. "But when they said they were Muslims, I knew they were our brothers."

There were about 175 troops in 2008 but there are now 35, according to the BBC and the Nato-led International Security Assistance Force.

The six orders from the UAE are a lifeline for Boeing, which needs international orders to avoid shutting down the C-17 assembly line. Last year, the company produced 14 of the cargo planes, but has slowed the line to produce 10 planes this year. It recently announced 1,100 redundancies.

At that rate, the business from the UAE will help to employ thousands of manufacturing workers in California for more than six months.

Boeing is also expanding its UAE operations due to the business, and is hiring technicians for a service team based with the aircraft, initially "near Dubai". The team will move to Abu Dhabi when facilities are completed, Boeing says.

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