



Lawmakers paint dire picture of Britain running out of weapons

Description

UK: Britain's Ministry of Defence must rapidly grow local industrial capacity in order speed rebuilding weapon stockpiles, the parliamentary Defence Committee says in a report to be published Mar 7.

The committee said at the current rate of progress it will take 10 years to replace weapon stocks gifted to Ukraine and rebuild British weapon numbers to an acceptable level.

Defense industrial capacity in Britain has atrophied over the decades since the end of the Cold War and the British, along with their NATO allies, have been caught out by a Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Committee Chairman Tobias Ellwood said in a statement issued with the report that government and industry must respond to concerns over weapon shortages.

"To be a credible force the U.K. needs to ensure that it has the capabilities it needs — which means making sure that we have sufficient personnel, weapons, ammunition and equipment," he said.

"We are concerned that it is taking so long to replenish U.K. stockpiles: both government and industry need to act. The Integrated Review Refresh [due to be published soon] and the budget need to show that the government understands the importance of UK defense in an increasingly dangerous world," said Ellwood.

The report itself pointed up the growing problem. "It is clear that the U.K. and its NATO allies have allowed ammunition stockpiles to dwindle to dangerously low levels," said the lawmakers. "It is clear that the manner in which Western governments procure armaments is not fit for purpose."

In evidence to the committee, retired Gen. Richard Barrons, former head of the British Joint Forces Command, lamented how acute the stockpile problem had become.

Since 1990 there has been a process of reductions "in size, in investment and in the numbers of key platforms" and "the hollowing out of stockpiles, engineering, reserves and infrastructure," he said.

Barrons said he would be surprised if Britain had "sufficient munitions to sustain a high intensity conflict

for more than about a week.”

“The Minister for Defence Procurement [Alex Chalk] told us that funding had been granted to the MoD in the Autumn [financial]Statement to both replenish and then increase U.K. ammunition stockpiles. However, this was projected to take over a decade,” said the committee report.

The British government acknowledges that part of the challenge in building stockpile resilience centers on reviving the defense industries’ medium- and high-skills base.

Much of the funding to replenish weapons stocks so far has been accounted for by a £229 million (\$275 million) deal with Saab in December 2022 to rebuild NLAW anti-tank missile stocks between 2024 and 2026.

A further 500 missiles had already been ordered for delivery this year.

NLAW was designed by Saab and assembled by Thales UK in a plant outside Belfast, Northern Ireland.

Ukrainian forces have received thousands of the missiles since the conflict started 12 months ago.

The British have also donated Javelin, Brimstone , Starstreak and AMRAAM anti-tank and anti-air missiles, along with more than 100,000 artillery shells, with a further 100,000 rounds to be delivered this year.

London has spent over £2.5 billion on weapons for Ukraine – making it the second-largest arms contributor after the United States.

The new parliamentary report says the MoD should return to the committee to brief lawmakers on the steps being taken to reduce the time it is taking to fill the gaps in weapon stockpiles – principally anti-air and anti-tank missiles and large-caliber ammunition.

As the panel points out, stockpile shortages are not confined to the British military.

“When we were at NATO HQ, we were told that the waiting list for [Raytheon] Javelin anti-tank missiles was roughly five years,” lawmakers wrote. And the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a U.S. think tank, found that the number of the company’s stinger anti-aircraft missiles given to Ukraine roughly equal to the total number built for all non-U.S. customers in the last 20 years, they added.

Production capabilities aren’t the only challenge facing industry, with the report pointing up U.S. defense export controls still being a limiting factor despite improvements.

When Wallace appeared before the committee, he said the move to open general licenses allowing imports and exports without controls between the U.S., U.K., Canada and Australia had been a big plus. But he complained about what he described as “ITAR taint,” a reference to the American weapons-export regime.

The British MoD spends about half a billion pounds a year complying with ITAR requirements, which means those funds are lost to actual equipment procurements at home or in the United States, said Wallace.

He said that there was agreement across the U.S. defense industry, the White House and Congress

that “if we want to work together, collaborate and burden-share, ITAR is a barrier that is not helpful. It needs to be either removed or bypassed, where appropriate.”

by Andrew Chuter

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