

## **UK Tornado force expands use of Litening pod for Afghan mission**

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UK Royal Air Force (RAF) Panavia Tornado GR.4 strike aircraft deploying to Afghanistan in 2009 are to be equipped with Rafael Advanced Defense Systems Litening III targeting pods, according to commanders of the new mission.

Aircraft and personnel from the RAF Lossiemouth-based 12 (Bomber) Squadron, which will be the first Tornado GR.4 unit to deploy to Kandahar Airfield "in the first half of 2009", are to use their Litening pods for photographic reconnaissance missions as well as targeting of precision-guided munitions and non-traditional intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance (ISAR) gathering for ground troops.

RAF aircrew say that until now the service has not utilised the reconnaissance functionality on the Litening pod that allows the pre-programming of the locations to be photographed into the pod before missions. Some consideration was given to transferring the Lockheed Martin Sniper advanced targeting pods currently being used by the UK BAE Systems Harrier GR.9s in Afghanistan, but it was eventually decided to use the Litening pods, which are already integrated on Tornado GR.4 aircraft supporting coalition forces in Iraq. "We will be taking a mix of pods bought with urgent operational requirement [UOR] funding for Iraq and pods bought with core money for the Eurofighter Typhoon force," said Wing Commander James Linter, commander of 12 Squadron.

The Tornado aircraft being deploying to Afghanistan to relieve the UK's Joint Force Harrier are currently in the process of receiving a number of UOR modifications on the combined maintenance and upgrade 'pulse line' at RAF Marham, according to RAF aircrew. These are understood to be Afghan-specific communications items, although it is the aspiration of the RAF to have a common pool of theatre-modified aircraft that can be switched between the Iraq and Afghanistan missions.

According to Wg Cdr Linter, the Afghan mission will be shared across the RAF Tornado GR.4 force. "We will be relieved by 617 Squadron - also a Lossiemouth-based squadron - but we will take turns with Marham-based squadrons," he said. "We used to do two months at Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, supporting Iraq, every 14 months but this will obviously go up with the Tornado force having to stand up two detachments."

Wg Cdr Linter said his aircrew were already beginning their work-up training for the Afghan mission, including deploying to RAF Fairford for expeditionary training as part of Exercise 'Crown Condor', and were scheduled to participate in mission-rehearsal exercises with the British Army unit they will be supporting in Afghanistan: 19 Light Brigade. They are also to carry out joint training with forward air controllers from the army at the Qinetiq-run UK Mission Training through Distributed Simulation - Capability Concept Demonstrator programme at RAF Waddington. "This will allow both my aircrew and the FACs to step into the other man's eyes," he said.

An RAF Tornado GR.4 with the Litening III targeting pod fitted to the underfuselage stores pylon (Tim Ripley) 1308420