

**South Africa signs giant deal to acquire eight Airbus military transport**  
**Agence France Presse**  
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The South African government signed a contract Thursday to become a partner in the Airbus A400M programme and to buy eight military transport aircraft being developed by Airbus Industrie.

The contract was signed in Pretoria by Defence Minister Mosiuoa Lekota, with the first delivery expected around 2010. The total cost of the planes would be around 830 million euros (1.07 billion dollars)

South African Public Enterprises Minister Alex Erwin told reporters after a cabinet meeting that the country would earn 430 million euros for manufacturing components for the military aircraft.

"We would be eligible for the first delivery. We will have to do some hard talking. All the funding countries will be looking to get the plane. But we will persuade them we really have the need," said Erwin.

South Africa will buy eight of the initial production of 188 transport aircraft. South African companies Denel and Aerosud will manufacture components for the planes.

Erwin said the aircraft would assist South Africa's growing peacekeeping role in Africa and "our ability to support, supply and deploy peacekeeping forces. That is why we want to be first in the queue for it."

Earlier, Airbus in a statement said: "Through its stake in the aircraft programme, South Africa's industry will participate in the design, engineering, industrialisation, manufacture, and in-service support of the A400M -- the world's most modern military transport aircraft."

"This initiative will see South Africa joining in at ground-level, delivering sustainable opportunities for export oriented industrial activity over the next 30 to 50 years."

The A400M troop and light armoured vehicle carrier is the most ambitious project ever launched by the European military industrial sector, carrying an estimated cost of 20 billion euros.

The European Aeronautic Defence and Space Company (EADS) owns 80 percent of Airbus, with the remaining 20 percent held by BAE Systems of Britain.

Prior to the South African contract, 180 planes had been ordered: 60 from Germany, 50 from France, 27 from Spain, 25 from Britain, 10 from Turkey, seven from Belgium and one from Luxembourg.

Airbus Military hopes to sell at least 200 in the next 15 to 20 years.

The first flight is scheduled for 2006, with initial deliveries planned for 2008.

South Africa's existing fleet of a dozen upgraded C130 medium transports and a few smaller Spanish-built CASA 212 light transports would not be able to meet future airlift requirements, including a greater focus on peacekeeping activities on the

African continent, officials have said.

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