

IDF plans pilotless chopper to evacuate wounded

Second Lebanon War experiences underline importance of AirMule's unique capabilities, officers say

• By YAAKOV KATZ

The Israel Air Force and IDF Medical Corps are working to secure funding within the military's upcoming multi-year plan for a revolutionary unmanned aerial vehicle that can fly like a helicopter and evacuate wounded soldiers in its hull from any terrain.

Called AirMule, the UAV is under development by the Yavne-based Urban Aeronautics firm. It is a single-engine UAV with vertical-takeoff-and-landing capabilities and has successfully completed the first phase of its flight testing, which included autonomous hovering.

The AirMule has performed 40 test hovers and accumulated 10 hours of flight time. Currently, the aircraft is undergoing a systems upgrade including the development

and installation of wheeled landing gear that will facilitate mobility on the ground.

Senior officers said this week that the IDF was interested in buying the AirMule and planned to ask for a special budget for the program under the military's new multi-year plan that is expected to be approved in the coming months by Maj.-Gen. Yoav Galant, who will become chief of General Staff in February.

The IDF's interest in the AirMule stems from lessons learned from the Second Lebanon War, when a large number of casualties needed to be evacuated by air. IDF assessments are that the sys-

tem could be operational within a few years.

"The AirMule is unique since it can bring supplies and cargo in its hull and then take back a wounded soldier," a senior officer involved in the project said this week.

The IDF has asked Urban Aeronautics to make some changes to the UAV, which currently only has room for one soldier.

"We want to see if there is a possibility to make room for another soldier inside the hull, and [to add] a light as well as a communication system to enable the soldier to speak with someone as he is being flown to safety," the

officer said.

If the budget is obtained, the IDF plans to invest some of it in the development of the AirMule. The goal, the IDF officer said, would be to distribute one AirMule UAV each to brigades and divisions operating in either Lebanon or the Gaza Strip.

"It has the unique ability to land anywhere – on a roof, in a field or even hover next to a window, open its back door and enable soldiers to slide their wounded comrade inside," he said.

"This could significantly reduce the amount of time it takes to evacuate a soldier from a battlefield."



GETTING SOLDIERS to safety. The AirMule unmanned aerial vehicle can fly like a helicopter and evacuate the wounded from anywhere.