



# Truly Multi-National?

The Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg may shortly decide whether to acquire new soldier equipment based on a multi-national co-operative programme

***The Netherlands' VOSS (Improved Operational Soldier System) programme is now at the end of its two year Pre-Study Phase, the latest in a series of planned stages of development for its soldier modernisation efforts. The next stop will be to begin its Study Phase, subject to endorsement by the Dutch Parliament which is expected to occur by the end of 2010 and, unlike its predecessor is scheduled to take months rather than years to complete. It is in this phase that VOSS may become the first soldier modernisation programme in the world to be a truly international procurement with both Belgium and Luxembourg poised to make a decision to start a cooperation and field identical systems through the same contract.***

Luc de Beer, Project Manager VOSS, Netherlands Ministry of Defence said, "The main element of the Study Phase is whether there is going to be co-operation with Belgium and Luxembourg."

Under provisional plans by the nations, Holland has been chosen as the lead nation for the acquisition and realization of the Smart vest. The Dutch requirement would see about 5,500 systems being built, based on the actual operational needs. If the three countries would co-operate, this could rise to about 10,000.

Pre-Study Phase, the VOSS programme undertook a market survey of available systems and modules for soldier modernisation. De Beer said, "The Pre Study Phase was designed to obtain more detail on the available quality of equipment, price and the possibilities on the market."

The VOSS programme as it is constituted today consists of three elements. The main component is the Smart Vest. This consists of the C4I module with light, basic, advanced and vehicle versions, all tasked with situational awareness; Power Supply module and the Load Carriage and Protection module which is also tasked with carrying water. De Beer added, "For the Integrated Head

Protection (IHP) we have a separate market survey and we are still working on that. The results of the market survey of the IHP will be part of the results of the Study Phase, not the Pre-Study phase because the Pre-Study phase was focused on the smart vest."

The E-Lighter will be part of the Power Supply Module. Developed in partnership with Fokker, the E-lighter is a diesel powered fuel source, carried by individual soldiers and weighs roughly 1.8kg. The E-lighter provides the energy supply for longer missions. De Beer said, "Inside VOSS we have a portfolio of power solutions and E-Lighter is one of the power solutions but, beside the E-Lighter we still have conventional batteries and we still have the power of the vehicle. We are talking to Fokker who have developed the first prototypes to get into contract for the further development and the eventual production. We are talking now. We hope to be under contract somewhere this Winter."

The Afghan theatre has seen equipment used by Dutch forces that has informed requirements for VOSS. Cooling vests, for evaluation purposes, were acquired and sent to forces based at Tarin Kowt in 2008. Another area has been communications. De Beer said, "Besides some clothing and vests, we also sent some PRRs which were procured outside VOSS and so were not part of the programme. It was just to have some kind of interim solution before VOSS equips the troops."

## Market approach

"Somewhere in the middle of next year we hope to complete the Study Phase and then go into the next phase which will be a Request for Quotation (RFQ)", said De Beer. "For industry, that is the most interesting part." Before issuing a RFQ, the Parliament has to be adequately informed.

Under the procurement strategy, there will be a request for the complete smart vest, C4I, ballistic protection and power in one contract. The one contract will have one

systems integrator which might be a consortium.

De Beer is emphatic that, "The choice of equipment is primarily being decided by the system integrator, not by the programme team. Of course we look at the market, we know about the equipment, but there is no mandating of new equipment. Because of this approach we hope that we have the best solution for the right budget. If you want to interfere of course you can but we think that in the end if you do that you don't get the right balance."

In the past the procurement outside soldier modernisation has seen the RNLA's C2 Support Centre (C2SC) at Ede play very much a hands-on role in integration and software development in contrast to other militaries who have transferred almost the entire responsibility to industry. For VOSS the C2SC may also have a similar role to play although limited to its core remit. De Beer said, "The C2SC will take care of the C2 chain. It won't be responsible for the systems integration. We decide on the software and the software will be built by the systems integrator or will be built by the C2SC but it could also be some sort of partnership. Time will tell."

Legacy equipment for VOSS will include weapons and clothing however, some time after VOSS is fielded both sets of equipment are scheduled for replacement. A new weapons family is also scheduled as a separate programme from 2015 after recently acquiring enhancement to their Colt Canada C7/C8 family as an interim life extension measure.

Beyond VOSS Phase 1, De Beer said that, "It could be that we have additional capabilities for the future VOSS. It could include Special Forces related capabilities as for instance at this stage, we won't integrate these needs into VOSS in the short term because it makes life too complex. If we can, we will facilitate that for the near future. This in order to have a comprehensive evolutionary approach." ■