BULLETIN BOARD

Shaun Connors looks at South Africa's Project Vistula, a truck-replacing programme originally launched in June 2004, which could make progress again later this year...







In June 2004 the South African armaments acquisition agency, ARMSCOR, issued a request for offers (RfO) for the South African Army's new tactical logistics vehicle fleet under Project Vistula. At this early stage Vistula was expected to deliver some 800 (8x8) 14-tonne and (6x6) 9-tonne trucks with armoured, mine-protected cabs.

It is understood the initial RfO was issued to 22 companies in the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, India, Italy, South Africa, Sweden, Ukraine and the US, and that six manufacturers were subsequently selected to submit vehicles for trials. Chassis-cabs supplied by DaimlerChrysler (Mercedes-Benz), IVECO, KAMAZ, MAN (now RMMV), Northbenz and Terex-TATRA commenced trials at the Gerotek test centre early 2005, these to be completed by the end of June 2005, the project study report by the end of the following month.

It is also understood that the then DaimlerChrysler teamed with Land Mobility Technologies (LMT) for their Actros-based bid, while the IVECO bid of ASTRA range trucks was primed by the then BAE Systems Land Systems South Africa. MAN, offering HX range trucks (modified from UK spec with a fully automatic transmission), is also understood to have had an arrangement with the then BAE Systems Land Systems South Africa, this specific to the MAN/KMW Integrated Armoured Cab (IAC). Terex-TATRA offered TATRA T 815-7 series trucks, KAMAZ offered derivatives of its cab-over-engine range of trucks, while Northbenz (of China) offered what is essentially a Chinese copy of an earlier generation Mercedes-Benz truck now produced in China.

There remains considerable media speculation as to precisely how individual vehicles performed during trials, with some sources suggesting that all six vehicles were successful in meeting the criteria to pass the technical trials. However, it is generally acknowledged that only three vehicles were fully evaluated, these being the Daimler, IVECO and MAN offerings. Terex-TATRA are understood to have voluntarily withdrawn from the competition during the evaluation phase, although it is believed this decision was Terex and not TATRA driven, and that the TATRA product performed very well during the trials it undertook.

Following the successful conclusion of trials the project report and the recommendation were submitted to the Defence Secretariat by ARMSCOR in November 2005. It is understood the report prompted a number of questions from the Secretariat, which led to an independent audit of the evaluation, that audit confirming the report and the recommendation. As of late August 2006 there had been no official comment on the status of the project, although it was known the original bids had expired on June 31st 2006 and that two separate bid extensions were subsequently requested. The first of these was until 30th July, the second until the end of September 2006.

At the time it was speculated that an official statement, or even award, regarding Project Vistula was to be timed for Africa Aerospace & Defence 2006 (20-24th September), however, this did not happen.

In October 2007 it was disclosed that ARMSCOR had declined to select a preferred bidder for Project Vistula and had written to bidders saying that it intended to 'initiate a new RfO process in due course'.









It would be January 2009 before reports again surfaced suggesting that Vistula was due to be relaunched, and during September 2009 ARMSCOR was confirmed to be close to re-launching the project. It was disclosed in September 2009 that a new RfO had been expected sometime around May 2009, with project intentions being that a preferred bidder may be announced by the end of the year, with (following contract award) deliveries under various orders running from 2012 to 2017. The intended May RfO slipped for governmental reasons to late-July, or possibly early August, and it was then suggested that the new RfO would be issued mid- to late-November.

In January 2010 sources suggested that a revised Vistula RfO was due to be released in February 2010, however, at the time of writing (March 2012) Project Vistula has yet to reappear. The South African military continues to struggle on with an increasingly unreliable, difficult and expensive to maintain SAMIL fleet, and the latest suggestions are that an announcement of sorts relating to a replacement procurement may be made mid-2012, but nothing official (an RfO for example) is expected until 2013. It is anticipated that when relaunched the revitalised project will continue to call for the 2010-touted figures of approximately 2,000 (4x4), 400 (6x6) and 2,600 (8x8) trucks.

Highlighting how numbers fluctuate as programmes evolve, when first announced back in 2004 Vistula was to deliver 800 (8x8) 14-tonne and (6x6) 9-tonne vehicles, these to replace the SAMIL 100 10-tonne (6x6) fleet, and possibly the mine-protected cab SAMIL 50 (Kwevoel-50) fleet). By late-2005 quoted numbers had increased to 579 (6x6) and 733 (8x8) tactical trucks, a later announced revision being for 946 (6x6) and 796 (8x8) trucks (over 1,000 of which were to be fitted with a DROPS/PLS hooklift system). By 2009 the overall requirement had expanded to include replacement of the SAMIL 50 5-tonne (4x4) fleet, and numbers required increased accordingly to approximately 1,600 (4x4), 1,200 (6x6) and 2,200 (8x8) trucks, the 1,600 (4x4) requirement reducing from an initial 1,800.

The SAMIL 20 2-tonne (4x4) fleet was, at this stage, to replaced under a separate program for which funds were hoped to be secured at the same time as funds for Vistula. This will no longer happen, and the replacement of the SAMIL 20 fleet has effectively been absorbed into the revised Vistula program.

When finally selected it is anticipated the new trucks will be acquired as off-the-shelf designs to be built locally, with specialised bodies to be developed and built as required. A high proportion of the (8x8) and a lesser number of (6x6) trucks will be fitted with locally developed armoured and mine-protected cabs, and some are highly likely to incorporate protected containers for specific roles. The (6x6) truck is limited in terms of front axle capacity, hence the larger number of (8x8) trucks. The (4x4) trucks are intended mainly for rear-area work and will probably not feature armoured cabs.

Around 15,500 SAMILs were originally delivered between the mid-1970s and 1992, and current fleets number approximately just under 3,000 SAMIL 100s, just over 5,000 SAMIL 50s and approximately 3,500 SAMIL 20s. By the end of production in 1992, no fewer than 16,864 SAMIL, SAKOM and SAMAG vehicles had been built by the now defunct Truckmakers and delivered to the SANDF.

It is probable that following the Vistula award a further batch of around 350 trucks will be ordered for specialist roles. These will have commonality with the Vistula platform and will replace current bridgelayer (MAN (8x8)), gun tractor (SAMIL (6x6)), HET (MAN (6x6)), Valkiri MARS (SAMIL (6x6)), and small numbers of some other specialist designs.

The next major vehicle project of the SANDF will be Project Sapula. Sapula calls for a new generation of mine-protected armoured personnel carriers (APCs) that are intended to use the basic mechanical components of the new truck family. The RFP for Sapula will only be issued after the Vistula selection has been finalised. The Sapula vehicles (mostly (4x4), a few (6x6)) will replace the current Casspir and Mamba armoured personnel carriers, the Mfezi armoured ambulance, the Okapi command vehicle and a number of other vehicle types, for a total of up to approximately 4,000 vehicles. A number of different vehicle configurations will be developed, including personnel carriers, mortar variants, ambulances, and command variants.





