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What's Next in National Security

# Chopper Shoot-Down Reveals Deeper Flaws in Afghanistan Ops

By David Axe [✉](#) July 16, 2009 | 8:11 am | Categories: [Af/Pak](#)

A heavy-lift helicopter, contracted by NATO, [was shot down by the Taliban](#) on Tuesday near the town of Sangin, in Afghanistan's Helmand province. Reports indicate a rocket-propelled grenade brought down the 30-ton, Moldovan Mi-26 chopper (pictured, above), the biggest operational model in the world. All six Ukrainian crew died — and an Afghan child was crushed to death by the falling debris.

The incident would be tragic, all on its own. But details that have surfaced, in the shoot-down's wake, add political controversy to the human tragedy.

Civilian choppers don't have all of the sophisticated self-defense equipment that helps protect military aircraft — nor do their crews always use the right defensive tactics. But NATO has no choice to but to rely on the unprotected aircraft. *[And in this particular case, it's possible no amount of protective gear would've helped. Helos don't have much defense against RPGs -- ed.]* A chronic shortage of suitable NATO choppers means the alliance contracts a large proportion of its front-line air logistics to civilian firms. When I was at the [Dutch base in Uruzgan in 2007](#), a civilian Mi-26 was a regular visitor, alongside U.S. C-130s and Dutch CH-47 Chinooks.

The chopper shortage breeds desperation. NATO has been known to do business with less-than-seemly companies, many of them based in Eastern Europe. [British journalist Richard North](#) points out that the destroyed chopper's operator, Pecotox Air, has been [banned from European airspace](#), due to safety violations — and has also been [implicated in a weapons smuggling probe](#). The shot-down Mi-26 was reportedly hovering over Sangin to deliver “humanitarian aid,” despite major fighting in the area for three weeks now. North believes the humanitarian claim is a front — that the Mi-26 was actually delivering supplies to a British base when it was hit, but the British government wants to distance itself from Pecotox, and from the broader lack of helicopters.

The chopper shoot-down is the latest blow to the U.S. and NATO's ongoing effort to supply the swelling ranks of foreign troops in mountainous, land-locked Afghanistan. Taliban fighters routinely torch truck convoys entering the country from Pakistan, and Kyrgyzstan successfully demanded more money and more restrictions for allowing the U.S. to keep using a major air hub at Manas air base.

With potentially tens of thousands of new troops headed to Afghanistan in coming months, the coalition's logistical needs will only grow. For that reason, both the British and Canadian governments are buying new and upgraded helicopters. And U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates has injected hundreds of millions of dollars into the Army, to boost the numbers of chopper crews for Afghanistan.

*[VIDEO: Liveleak]*

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