

**PROFESSIONAL PILOT****INTERNATIONAL OPS**

# Commercial operators tackle African peacekeeping mission

**Multinational pilots fly Russian helicopters in a setting defined by surprise and adventure.**

**By Doug Brooks**  
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Helicopters in Sierra Leone tend to fly fast and low, just above—or even below—the treetops. It is an exhilarating experience for pilots and passengers, but it is also a practical method of avoiding rebel bullets. Flying helicopters in Africa can be challenging and exceedingly dangerous but no continent in the world has a greater need for rotary-wing aircraft.



**Mil Mi26 Halo (L) and Mi8 Hip helicopters fly low over the Sierra Leonean jungle. Private contractors find such Russian aircraft to be more durable and easier to maintain**

**than their Western equivalents.**

With many large mining operations and offshore oil facilities, a number of

helicopter companies are successfully operating industrial support operations even in some remarkably distressed countries. In South Africa there are a number of flourishing companies doing everything from sightseeing to corporate transportation.

But in the rest of Africa most helicopters are used for military and humanitarian operations. There are more than a dozen ongoing conflicts in Africa, all requiring military, peacekeeping and/or humanitarian support.

These conflicts utilize helicopter troop transports and gunships and at the same time they generate refugees and internally displaced people requiring humanitarian relief and emergency support. When peacekeeping forces enter these conflicts vast numbers of fixed and rotary-wing aircraft are needed to support their military and humanitarian operations.

In African countries that have been suffering from conflict for years infrastructure is often nonexistent outside of the capital city. Roads, when they exist, are often in such poor condition that only the most rugged vehicles can navigate them—and then only in the dry season.

**Business end of a Mil MI24 Hind gunship over Sierra Leone. Note the gun turret, underwing hardpoints and 2 auxiliary fuel tanks. Combat proven during the Soviet war in Afghanistan and other conflicts, the heavily armored Hind is virtually impervious to small arms fire.**



During the tropical rainy season, the roads often become rivers, with the water dredging deep trenches in the surfaces and washing out bridges. This does not leave many options for critical transportation.

In some cases airfields are available, but the quality of the landing surface can vary dramatically and air traffic control is often nonexistent, with only an abandoned and looted tower remaining. Tall grass with hidden termite mounds, as hard as concrete and up to 6 ft high, make unmaintained fields extremely hazardous.

Even on paved fields deferred maintenance and war damage have left craters and cracks. Few fields outside of the main cities have fences to keep goats, chickens, cattle and even local villagers off them. All of which leaves much of the transportation, communication and relief operations up to helicopters.

### **Hinds, Hips and headaches**

One high-time Africa pilot is Kasi, a South African national whose full name is withheld for his protection. Kasi served in the South African military for 17 years, flying Puma and Alouette III helicopters as well as fixed-wing aircraft including CASA C212s and Cessna 185s. After his service he flew a variety of corporate jets, including various models of Learjets and a Citation II/SP, for a client whose business took him all over southern Africa.

Then, a few years ago, he jumped at an opportunity to work for a small helicopter company in Sierra Leone. There was a twist, however—he would not be flying Pumas or corporate jets. He would be flying Russian Mil MI24 “Hind” gunships for the government in its war against the Revolutionary United Front rebels.



**Previously a South African corporate pilot, Kasi now flies Hind gunships on contract. Pay is adequate but low by US standards.**

Hind gunships are far less expensive to purchase and operate than their western counterparts. They are heavily armed and armored helicopters ideal for the low-intensity guerrilla wars common to the African continent.

The toughest trick for a Western pilot when it comes to mastering the Russian aircraft is locating the various controls and dials and determining their function, since they are all labeled in Russian.

The weight of the MI24 is such that it cannot hover and it requires a short takeoff roll to reach transitional speed. Nevertheless, Kasi enjoys flying the aircraft and is willing to put up with spartan living conditions, choking tropical

heat, sporadic pay and all the hassles that come with managing an aviation business in a developing country.

Most pilots and aircraft flying for governments, humanitarian organizations and the UN in Africa are Ukrainian or Russian. Pilots from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe work for low wages—often a fraction of what Western pilots would settle for. Nevertheless, it's a good deal for them.

They are paid in dollars and earn several times the salary that they could make doing more mundane flying back in their home countries. They are also able to take advantage of the fact that most of the rotary-wing aircraft engaged in military and relief work in Africa are built in Russia.

Russian-made aircraft tend to be powerful and robust. They are simpler to fix with parts that are more readily available in Africa than their Western counterparts. In addition, mechanics who are familiar with Russian aircraft are easier to find—though locating truly competent and meticulous groundcrews can be a problem.

Companies using Western aircraft complain that it is difficult to compete despite having more sophisticated and higher-quality equipment since the comparative operational costs are just too high.

The relatively few companies that operate Western aircraft in Africa survive by performing niche services that Russian aircraft simply cannot do—for example, medical evacuation duties that require a 24/7 all-weather capability.

Western companies also complain that the larger aid organizations do not consider safety issues when they do their contracting. Aid organizations simply focus on moving maximum aid for minimum costs, which usually means Russian aircraft and Eastern pilots.

### **ICI carves unique niche**

One Western company that has operated successfully for years in Africa is

International Charter Incorporated of Oregon (ICI). Founded in 1994 by former US Special Forces soldiers, ICI survives by combining the best of East and West.

**In much of Africa helicopters are the only reliable means of providing medical evacuation. Here ICI Medic Rick Dutton helps load a wounded Nigerian soldier into a company Mil MI8 in Liberia.**



What makes ICI unique is that it subcontracts to a Russian company that supplies aircraft, crews and maintenance personnel. ICI calculates that Mil MI8MTV helicopters require less than 1/3 of the maintenance downtime needed by the similarly-sized Sikorsky UH60 Black Hawks, making them far more cost-effective.

ICI provides managers to supervise and ensure quality. It also provides armed guards on flights to allow them to deliver aviation services to militarily unstable areas that other companies regard as far too dangerous for safe flight operations.

ICI has aided extremely risky peacekeeping operations in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Haiti, and is currently supporting a US military training program in Nigeria.

The company's willingness to carry out necessary but dangerous operations and its rapid response for medevac have earned ICI high praise from the African troops they count as their primary customers.

In a Jun 2001 presentation to Washington DC policymakers, ICI founder Brian Boquist stressed the value of helicopters for peacekeeping operations in Africa.

"Helicopters are not just important," he said. "They are everything." He went on to list the tasks that cannot be performed without them—a list that included carrying out reconnaissance, ambushing enemy forces, seizing targets, advancing and retreating, supplying forces on the ground,

evacuating casualties and performing search and rescue.

ICI evolved from a routine transport provider to a company doing combat airfield seizures with UN-mandated African peacekeeping troops in MI8 helicopters. At the same time it supported humanitarian organizations providing relief to wartorn towns and villages.

The company has also rescued members of several nongovernmental organizations trapped by war and on more than one occasion helped evacuate embattled US embassies.

In some contracts ICI has used giant MI26s—the largest helicopters in the world and capable of carrying 20 metric tons of cargo. In one instance ICI squeezed nearly 200 troops into an MI26 for a short hop! Despite these robust operations ICI maintains enviable safety and readiness levels, making it the 1st choice for several key US State Department contracts in Africa.

### **It's a living**

For Kasi, the South African flying the Russian gunship in Sierra Leone, Africa is a sweet gig. Despite the bugs, the malaria, the snakes, the constant maintenance and parts headaches, and the often-delayed salary, countries such as Sierra Leone are gorgeous and the flying is frequent and challenging.

Kasi made a comfortable living in South Africa, but freely admits that one of the primary reasons he left his home in Cape Town is for the enjoyment of flying in Sierra Leone. Every mission is different and the variety ensures that the job never becomes routine or boring. The element of danger does not hurt either, he says.

Kasi's salary is not large by American standards, it is paid in US dollars. This is important for Kasi, since the value of South Africa's own currency, the Rand, has plummeted in recent months.

With the war in remission, Kasi is mostly flying military officers and government officials to various towns around the country. Although there is always the possibility that fighting will flare up again, there are still enough challenges even without the rebels.

During Sierra Leone's wet season it rains every day and the clouds are low and dense. When the dry season hits, the Harmattan winds blow a fine dust out of the Sahara that creates a uniform dirty yellow color throughout the sky that disorients pilots, especially when flying over water.

And there are always the issues of maintenance and parts to worry about—Africa's leading causes of aviation accidents. Other operational hazards persist as well.

When the UN began its peacekeeping operation in Sierra Leone in 1999 it established a basic air traffic control system to organize the dozens of daily flights bringing in aid and supporting operations, but there still is no radar.

Worse, the mix of pilots from all over the world brings different understandings and procedures that can make things interesting very quickly. There has already been at least one midair accident and many would agree it's a miracle that more have not occurred.



**United Nations peacekeepers in Africa rely on the Mil Mi26 Halo, the world's largest production helicopter. Mi26 cockpit crews typically consist of a pilot, copilot, flight engineer and navigator.**

These difficulties, combined with the poor field conditions, guerrilla armies and other hazards, help to explain why Sierra Leone and some other African countries—especially Angola—have among the worst aviation accident rates in the world.

Kasi is philosophical about the dangers and you rarely see him openly annoyed. Even a short visit with him is revealing. Normally easygoing and

friendly, he is all business when he is readying his Hind for a flight.

Once in the air, however, he flies like someone who really enjoys his job. Forgotten are the bugs, the heat, the hassles and the war. A low-altitude helicopter flight in a place as interesting, tragic and spectacular as Sierra Leone makes Kasi's choice of occupation abundantly understandable. And, to some, enviable.



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