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T-50 Fighter Aborts Takeoff During MAKS Demonstration

By Roland Oliphant

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A Mercedes being pulled out of the mud during the MAKS air show in Zhukovsky on Sunday. A heavy downpour drenched the last day of the show. **Denis Sinyakov**

ZHUKOVSKY, Moscow Region — Dark clouds gathered over the T-50, Russia's first stealth fighter, on Sunday when a test pilot abruptly aborted takeoff of the plane during a demonstration flight at the MAKS air show over what the plane's maker called a "malfunction" in its right engine.

Details are few about what went wrong with the T-50. But the incident could raise questions about the fifth-generation fighter and embarrass the government, which proudly put it on display for its first public flights at the weeklong air show, which ended Sunday with a record weekend attendance despite heavy rain.

The twin-engine T-50 had reached about 100 kilometers per hour when the pilot decided to abort takeoff in front of thousands of spectators at the Zhukovsky airfield, said a spokesman

for United Aircraft Corp., the state-owned holding that incorporates top aircraft makers.

The plane did not leave the ground, and the pilot deployed a brake parachute to slow the aircraft down. Some spectators reported seeing a flash of light.

“At a speed of about 100 kilometers per hour, test pilot Sergei Bogdan decided to abort the takeoff,” the United Aircraft Corp. spokesman told Interfax.

The spokesman said the pilot had detected an unspecified “malfuction” in the right engine and aborted the takeoff in full accordance with the rules for test flights.

A visual inspection of the plane and its engines showed no signs of damage, news reports said. An investigation has been opened.

Izvestia, citing unidentified aviation officials, said the malfuction might have been connected with a lack of air in the engine or Sunday’s high humidity. The report noted that test pilot Bogdan had also steered the T-50 during its maiden flight in January 2010.

The plane, meant to match the U.S. F-22 Raptor, is awaiting new engines and state-of-the-art equipment after years of delays in its production. Two models are currently undergoing tests, another two are expected to roll off the production line soon, and serial production is slated for 2015 at the earliest.

No more T-50 flights were held Sunday, and only about 30 of 75 scheduled demonstration flights took place because of bad weather, Interfax reported.

Still, MAKS organizers touted the event as a major success, noting that an estimated 100,000 visitors had flocked to the Zhukovsky airfield every day since Friday, when the air show opened to the public.

Spectators also seemed impressed with the show. One female visitor was so overwhelmed by the sight of the T-50 roaring overhead last week that she appeared to break down in tears. “I’m just so happy for Russian aviation,” she said.

But a closer look revealed that the tears were caused by the blazing sun that sometimes made it impossible to see where in the sky the jet was, and the words were spoken in jest — but not entirely. The T-50 did look pretty impressive, even after a performance by the magnificent Eurofighter Typhoon.

Not everyone was having such a great time, though. Two Croats and an Argentine were arrested at the air show for photographing “top secret” things, Interfax reported. Perhaps mindful of not breaking the same laws, Interfax did not mention what the trio had pointed their cameras at.

But while visitors squinted against the sun to make out the jets zooming around the sky, company executives were looking even higher.

After unveiling plans to reclaim the cutting edge of military aerospace with the T-50 and once again become a contender in the commercial sector with the Sukhoi Superjet regional aircraft, Russian companies on Friday outlined their plans to conquer the heavens.

Energia announced plans for a new space shuttle to fill the void left by the now retired American fleet, and Moscow-based Orbital Technologies confirmed that it would build an orbiting hotel with room for seven guests by 2016. Other plans include flying tourists to the dark side of the moon and, by 2030, to Mars.

"Space tourism is a real and fast-growing business," said Orbital Technologies head Sergei Kostenko, according to Reuters. "Whoever builds the first new spaceship now will reap big dividends."

Energia, which in 2001 put the first U.S. millionaire in space, said it hopes to have a six-person tourist shuttle operating by 2015. Seats will not go on sale until 2013.

Russia now holds a monopoly on space flight since the U.S. ended its shuttle program in July. The international space station is reliant for resupply and crew rotation on Soyuz rockets launched from the Baikonur Cosmodrome, which Russia leases from Kazakhstan.

But Energia management cautioned that it would be an uphill struggle. "The U.S. has more possibilities than us right now," said Alexander Derechin, the company's deputy chief designer, referring to the U.S. government's higher spending on NASA and a proliferation of private firms growing up to service the space sector, Reuters reported.

Other deals announced Friday included the troubled Moskovia Airlines ordering three Superjet-100s from Sukhoi Civil Aviation for delivery in 2013.

Moskovia, which spent the first half of the year locked in a legal battle with creditors who were seeking to declare it bankrupt, had its flight certification suspended for two weeks earlier this summer after the Federal Air Transportation Agency found that its financial situation was hurting flight safety and passenger rights.

Meanwhile, U.S. engineering group Eaton signed a joint venture with Russian firm Aviation Equipment to localize the production of hydraulic components on Wednesday.

Another highlight of this year's show was the unveiling of naval defense specialist Morinformsistema-Agat's "Pandora's Box" — a frightening, James Bond villain-like cruise missile system concealed in a shipping container.

Avia Salon, the organizers of the air show, have said they expected more than $10 billion worth of deals to be sealed during the week. A final figure was not immediately released Sunday.

Not every agreement that gets inked at MAKS comes to fruition. An earlier plan to build a new airliner, the Tu-334, foundered after funds dried up — even though Pulkovo Airlines, since merging with Rossia, signed a $300 million deal with MiG for 25 of the new jets at MAKS 2003, Moskovsky Novosti reported.

The Superjet is in a better position than that; production has started and initial deliveries have begun.

But lurking on the outskirts of the airfield was a powerful — some might say poetic — reminder to take the bombast and optimism of air shows with a pinch of salt.

Energia's planned space shuttle will not be Russia's first attempt at cosmic mass transit. The Buran, a direct response to the U.S. shuttle program built by Energia in its Soviet incarnation, made one impressive unmanned flight in 1988 before being mothballed.

Visitors to MAKS can see the distinctive white tail fin of a Buran shuttle in a field a few hundred meters from the main exhibition area. But a photographer who ventured for a closer look discovered that only the side facing the public appeared flight worthy. Pictures posted on LiveJournal show the starboard flank of the craft, facing away from the public, was quite literally a wreck.

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