

Audit of the assessment of the operational capability of the 2020 air-to-ground communication system armasuisse

Key facts

For the first time, the Swiss Federal Audit Office (SFAO) audited the 2020 air-to-ground communication system project at armasuisse (ar). The audit focused on the project management and the extent to which it will ensure that the 2020 air-to-ground communication system will be operational by 2025. In addition, the implementation of four open recommendations made in the SFAO's report on the reconnaissance drone system 15 (ADS 15)¹ was reviewed.

The 2020 air-to-ground communication system project was managed as a top project of the Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport (DDPS) until 2019. Following the re-prioritisation of the DDPS' top project portfolio in 2020, the 2020 air-to-ground communication system is no longer managed as such. According to the 2018 Armed Forces dispatch, a budget of CHF 126 million was allocated.

In terms of project management, the findings of the audit were good overall. However, factors in the project environment are endangering the achievement of the objectives and indicate an urgent need for action in the DDPS.

Risks and problems regarding the availability and performance of the Armed Forces' command and support base are jeopardising the project's success

Risk management is effective and addresses the risks and problems at the right levels at an early stage. The project management is addressing four risks and problems in particular: resource availability, system architectures, "network readiness" (connection to the Swiss command network) and operations. These areas are undisputed within the project, but the discussions about the causes or approaches to solutions led to tough disputes between the participants. The coordination meetings between ar and the Armed Forces Command Support Organisation (AFCSO) that were introduced at the end of 2020 are solution-oriented.

The project lacks committed and binding resources from the AFCSO in the network and services sub-projects. This will have a direct impact on the rollout of the 2020 air-to-ground communication system. The project is therefore trying to procure these externally if necessary. The SFAO recommends that the necessary additional costs be determined without delay, clarified with the Armed Forces Staff (AFS) and, if need be, included in the budget.

The architecture has not yet been approved by the AFCSO. In order to be able to keep to the migration schedule, a request for an architecture exemption has been made to the AFCSO. However, these exceptions pose a risk to the AFCSO for subsequent operations, which is why the risks of granting them in favour of the project's migration schedule must

¹ The audit report "Procurement of reconnaissance drone system 15" (audit mandate 18352) is available on the website of the SFAO (www.sfao.admin.ch).

be carefully weighed up. The architecture must be approved by 7 May 2021, failing which the rollout at the Dübendorf and Payerne sites will be postponed by a year.

With respect to ar's commissioning of the AFCSO, there is potential for improvement in the 2020 air-to-ground communication system project. Since the issue cannot be resolved by ar alone, the SFAO directs its recommendation to the Defence Group. It recommends that the role of the ICT sub-project manager and the drafting of mandates for the implementation of the technical requirements for the AFCSO be worked out as part of the implementation of the recommendations of the Deloitte report "DDPS procurements" from 2020.

2020 air-to-ground communication system highlights problems in the DDPS' overall portfolio and resource management

The audit of the 2020 air-to-ground communication system project reveals fundamental risks and problems in the area of resource management that go beyond the project level. Although this was not an explicit focus of the SFAO's audit, the issue is so central and critical that it needs to be highlighted.

Portfolio management, coordination of internal ICT providers within the Federal Administration, departmental resource management and integrated overall planning based on strategic decisions and prioritisation show a significant need for action on the part of the DDPS. Internal project materials as well as internal and external DDPS analyses provide a consistent picture in this regard.

Since mid-2020, the AFCSO and AFS have been working on focusing AFCSO resources on the important projects. The SFAO welcomes the measures introduced by the Armed Forces management, but sees an urgent need for these to be closely managed at Armed Forces management level and for the department management to be involved if necessary. The SFAO plans to audit ICT management at the DDPS separately and is therefore refraining from making a recommendation in this report.

Follow-up SFAO report 18352 "ADS 15"

In report 18352, the SFAO made four recommendations to ar. One recommendation has been implemented, so it can now be closed. Two recommendations cannot be assessed until the materials competence centre is operational. One recommendation calls for ongoing reviews until the end of the project and these will have to be continued in the operational phase, which is why the recommendation remains open.

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