

Brazilian Mil Mi-35M

A bulletin from the Brazilian Air Force Command (Força Aérea Brasileira – FAB) on March 1, 2022, announced it would be deactivating its Russian-built Mil Mi-35M *Hind* attack helicopters by the end of this year (2022).

In total 11 airframes are to be put into storage, with no official word about their future. One other has been handed over to the Air Force's museum, the Museu Aeroespacial, in Rio de Janeiro.

The announcement of FAB's Mi-35M 'retirement' took experts on Brazilian military aviation by surprise because FAB has a tradition of operating

its combat types for decades. For instance, the Northrop F-5E Tiger II fighters, the first batches of which were received in the 1970s, are still operational, having been modernised to the M standard by Embraer and AEL Sistemas. Their withdrawal from service has only recently been announced, with the arrival of the Gripen E.

The 12 Mil Mi-35M were originally all new machines, delivered from the factory. They have been in use for just over ten years – the first incorporated by FAB on April 17, 2010, with the last three arriving in 2014.

Since entering service, not a single Mi-35M has been lost

through accident and the type has amassed several 'firsts' in Brazil. It was the first – and remains the only – attack helicopter operated by the Brazilian Armed Forces. It's also the most heavily armed helicopter with its Ataka-V anti-tank missiles and twin-barrel 23mm cannon capable of destroying light armoured vehicles. It is the only military aircraft in Brazil equipped with this type of weaponry.

A Brazilian first

The first three *Hinds* arrived in Brazil on December 16, 2009. They were delivered from the factory in Rostov-on-Don,

Russia, to the Porto Velho AFB, in the middle of the Brazilian Amazon, by an Antonov An-124-100 followed two days later by an Ilyushin Il-76TD containing support equipment, spares and other items. The first Brazilian military aviator to fly the model (still in Russia) was Major-Aviator Armindo T M Antônio, who said: "The helicopter has good manoeuvrability and it is equipped with modern weapons systems. The cockpit is well protected. It is a perfect combat helicopter." He added that it was for these reasons the Mi-35M became "the first combat helicopter of our military aviation".



Put out to
grass

The decision by Brazil to ditch its *Hind* gunships by the end of 2022 came as a surprise. **Claudio Lucchesi** examines the factors behind the grounding of the fleet

Once in service in the Amazon region, the Russian-built machines proved to be useful and effective, including against illicit flights, many of them by drug traffickers, often coming from neighbouring countries.

In 2018, Lt Col Aviator Rômulo Amaral, then the commander of the unit operating the Mi-35M, the 2nd Squadron of the 8th Aviation Group (2nd/8th GAV), 'Esquadrão Poti', highlighted the reliability of the type and their suitability to carry out tasks even in difficult weather conditions and in remote areas. He said: "It can land on any hard surface, in remote areas, with minimal ground infrastructure

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Another point highlighted by Lt Col Amaral was the fact that the arrival of the Mi-35M (designated in service by FAB as AH-2 Sabre) allowed missions for which there was not a suitable aircraft before. He added: "The acquisition of a large aircraft with an extensive range of armaments, made it

possible for us operationally, to carry out missions that were not yet explored and that differed from those that were used for the defence of our territory. The presence of a full-mobile cannon became a great differential in relation to the other machines we used, as it was disconnected from the old concept of using weapons aligned with the axis of the aircraft.

"The arrival of the aircraft in Brazilian territory arose from the need to implement a vector that was capable of fulfilling the defence requirements of our territory, providing power projection and prompt response to transnational illicit traffic in the most remote points of the Amazon region."

Assault missions

The Mi-35M has the *Hind* family's unique capability of being a heavily armed attack helicopter, capable of airborne assault missions with troops (being able to carry up to eight fully-armed soldiers), medvac



Above: Viewed from another Mi-35M, a Brazilian Mi-35M flies over the Amazon rainforest, in the Madeira River area. Considered very useful and effective by the aircrew, Brazilian Mi-35Ms were mainly used against illicit flights in the Amazon region, often from neighbouring countries



Left: A Mi-35M on approach to Porto Velho AFB in the heart of the Amazon region
All images Claudio Lucchesi



A Mi-35M being prepared for a night sortie on the ramp of Porto Velho AFB



Ataka-V anti-tank missiles on a Brazilian AF Mi-35M

missions and also to transport of technical personnel to remote locations.

However, the FAB never put the helicopter's troop transport capability to use, instead it kept the Mi-35M solely in the profile of an attack helicopter and for the interception of light (and slow) aircraft in illicit flights crossing borders – usually linked to drug and arms trafficking.

The arrival of the 12 AH-2 Sabres took place in four batches of three units each (in 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2014). If there were doubts about the adaptation of the Russian-built helicopter to the Amazon region, these were

dispelled by several military exercises and live-fire training drills, in real operations, one of which saw the joint operation with 10 Mi-35Ms on October 8, 2015.

No replacement

Contrary to usual FAB procedures in which a type is withdrawn from service only when a replacement has been delivered, the Mil Mi-35M is being retired from service without an imminent replacement. When it goes out of service, FAB will no longer have an aircraft with its capabilities and there is no forecast of a newer, more modern model replacing it. Another factor that makes

the withdrawal from service of the Mi-35M from the FAB rather unusual is that at the end of 2020, contracts had been signed between Russian Helicopters, which controls the type's manufacturer, Rostvertol, and a private Brazilian company, Indústria de Aviação e Serviços (IAS), in Belo Horizonte city, guaranteeing technical support, maintenance and repairs in Brazil for the Mi-35M.

The contract also covered more complex service and full overhauls to be carried out at facilities in Russia. This was set up within the scope of compensation obligations (offset)

on the Russian side, on the contract for the acquisition of the 12 Mi-35M by the FAB. Now, however, with the deactivation of the aircraft, this entire structure assembled at the IAS will no longer have any function without even having ever been used.

Sanctions to blame

In the FAB, the unofficial explanation for the retirement of the Mi-35M is the same one given for the reduction of airframes in the new Embraer KC-390 transport deal – lack of funds. In the case of the former, funding for FAB to continue operating the helicopters. A full overhaul in

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A Brazilian Air Force Mi-35M Hind at the Rostvertol plant

Russia on a single Mi-35M costs approximately \$6m. However, with just over ten years of service, to date none of the helicopters has reached the full overhaul deadline. Experts and technicians involved with the Mi-35M program at the FAB (who talked on condition of anonymity), point to a more direct reason for the withdrawal of the Russian helicopter from service – the US government sanctions against Russia, following the annexation of Crimea in 2014. It's important to note that the decision to withdraw the helicopter from service by FAB was officially announced before the start of the current war in Ukraine.

Russian Helicopters and Rostvertol are among the companies included in the US 'blacklist'. The US took action even before the war in Ukraine to 'punish' not only the Russian companies but also any financial institutions that promote business with banned Russian companies. This meant that Brazilian banks, wary of suffering reprisals, have refused to make money transfers between Brazil and Russia – including payments for spare parts for the Mi-35M. This, therefore, is the most likely explanation for FAB's premature deactivation of Brazil's first attack helicopter. **AFM**



A pilot's perspective of the Mi-35M cockpit, captured during a flight over the Amazon rainforest