

German air force in dire straits, chief of staff says

Funds are urgently needed to modernize its weaponry and systems, Gerhartz says.

BERLIN: Nato member Germany's air force is in dire straits and funds are urgently needed to modernise its weaponry and systems, the air force chief of staff said on Wednesday.

"The Luftwaffe is at a low point," Lieutenant General Ingo Gerhartz, who took over as chief of staff of the air force about a month ago, told 200 industry executives, military officers and lawmakers at an event in Berlin on Wednesday evening.

Gerhartz said his assessment followed visits to various air force sites and discussions with troops that revealed serious deficits in the readiness of aircraft and other equipment.

"Aircraft are grounded due to a lack of spare parts, or they aren't even on site since they're off for maintenance by the industry," he said. He said a 400-hour inspection of the Eurofighter combat jets now took a total of 14 months, twice as long as planned, and this was unacceptable.

His comments followed recent reports by the defense ministry and the German parliament's military ombudsman that revealed significant gaps in military equipment and personnel.

A February ministry report showed only 39 of 128 Eurofighter jets were available for training and combat use last year on average, and just 26 of 93 older-model Tornado fighter jets.

Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservatives and the centre-left Social Democrats (SPD) are finalizing budget plans for 2019, but Finance Minister Olaf Scholz, from the SPD, has been resisting moves to accelerate increases in military spending.

Merkel this month forecast steady increases in German military spending in coming years, in line with Berlin's pledge to meet a Nato target of moving toward

spending 2 per cent of economic output by 2024, but she gave no details.

Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen has been pressing for increased spending after Scholz's previous longer-term plan called for military outlays to edge lower after reaching 1.3 per cent of economic output in 2019, up from 1.2 per cent now.

Von der Leyen has pledged that German military spending will reach 1.5 per cent of gross domestic product by 2025.

Gerhartz urged lawmakers at the Wednesday event to back a more sustainable spending plan that would allow the air force to rebuild its equipment and improve planning for new weapons and upgrades to existing systems.

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