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Team ABL has been given the green light by the U.S. Air Force to begin the next major step for the Airborne Laser (ABL) program: extensive modifications on a prototype 747-400 Freighter aircraft.

The Air Force certified to Congress last week that the Airborne Laser program is on track and ready to begin the 18-month modification work once the aircraft flies to Wichita, Kan., next month. The prototype, which will use a basic Boeing 747-400 Freighter airframe as the flying platform, rolled off the assembly line this week in Everett, Wash. The aircraft has been designated the YAL-1A Attack Laser.

Team ABL -- comprising Boeing, Lockheed Martin, TRW and the Air Force -- is developing a high-energy chemical oxygen iodine laser carried aboard the modified 747, capable of shooting down theater ballistic missiles during their boost phase of flight. ABL offers a critical deterrent: much of the debris from destroyed missiles most likely would fall on territory from which the missiles were launched - not on friendly territory or troops.

"In addition to being chosen as the boost-phase intercept element of the Department of Defense missile-defense architecture, the ABL will have emergency capability as soon as 2003 against the rapidly evolving international missile threat," said Paul Shennum, Boeing Airborne Laser vice president.

"In just three years, the flexibility of the airborne platform and its rapid mobility will provide the United States with defense and policy options never before available to address the serious threats from these rogue countries."

Secretary of the Air Force F. Whitten Peters' certification, in the form of a report to Congress, ended a two-week series of technical and programmatic presentations to senior Air Force and Department of Defense officials at the Pentagon by Col. Mike Booen, program director for the Airborne Laser.

In the report, Secretary Peters certified that the ABL program continues to meet or exceed every technical and programmatic milestone and remains on-cost and on-schedule.

The Air Force certification report detailed the Airborne Laser's progress in five technical areas identified in an Independent Assessment Team report delivered to Congress in March. Those areas are: the North Oscura Peak test program; scintillometry data collection and analysis; the lethality/vulnerability program; the countermeasures test and analysis effort; and reduction and analysis of atmospheric data for fiscal years 1997 and 1998. "The ABL program continues to meet all of its technical requirements while maintaining cost and schedule performance," Shennum added.

Boeing has overall program management and systems integration responsibilities for ABL, and also is developing the Battle Management system.

Lockheed Martin Missiles & Space, of Sunnyvale, Calif., is building the ABL target-acquisition, fire control and beam systems. TRW, of Redondo Beach, Calif., is building the laser and the related ground-support subsystem.

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