

Arctic Needs Light Aviation

"People are tired of the unending pointless debate. Clearly, we've had enough talking and writing about this subject if the aviation bureaucrats in the capital can't be bothered with it. It is time we acknowledge that, here at the end of the twentieth century, our country is incapable of developing appropriate airplanes and helicopters for the North." This is the kind of comment I've been hearing more and more often lately from pilots in Igarka, Dudinka, Khatanga, Dikson...

It's true. There have been a lot of articles published on this in the press, parliamentary inquiries, letters from aviation workers to various ministries and government agencies. But, most important, the responses coming back from government have started to really irritate northern residents. And there are good reasons for this. The problems have remained unsolved for years.

Let's think back to a time almost fifty years ago when O.K. Antonov built the remarkable airplane An-2. It became indispensable in the Arctic, and people are still flying in it today. Later, the Li-2 and the Il-14 went into service. They also made a major contribution to development in the high latitudes. It's no accident that all of these planes, once they had completed their length of service, came to occupy an honoured place in the annals of aviation. But the time of such technology has passed. The technology no longer meets the demands of the day. It has been taken out of production - consigned to the archives, so to speak. The problem is that nothing has been brought forward to replace it.

Now we fly to the Arctic on the giant Il-76, An-12 and An-26. Somewhere far away you can hear the drone of the Il-114 turbines. It will be years before the Ministry of the Aviation Industry will be able to meet all of the demands of the Ministry of Civil Aviation for the An-74. In short, the North is bereft of light aviation. And the situation with helicopters is no better. To cite just a single example, Aeroflot doesn't have an aircraft can cross large bodies of water safely and in any weather. From the town of Dikson to Srednii Island is a distance of 750 kilometres, a mere stone's throw by Arctic standards. Little more than four hours' flying time for the Mi-8 helicopter, at least in theory. But what about in reality?

"We'll be in the air seven or eight hours," says V. Kharin, commander of the Dikson Air Enterprise. "In the Arctic you can't always fly by the shortest route, but this time it isn't the whims of the weather that are forcing us to change our course. Ministry of Civil