

Keeping baloney out of Africa

Contributed by A. Carl LeVan, Ph.D.
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Africa has never been as important to the United States as it is now. America now imports more oil from West Africa than it does from the Persian Gulf, while China's demand for that same oil is growing. The Bush administration has reacted to this new reality with meaningful goodwill measures, including the Millennium Challenge Account and the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief. Such aid prompted President John Kufuor of Ghana to laud President Bush during his recent visit for doing more for Africa "than any previous American presidency." However, the Pentagon's new Africa Command, AFRICOM, threatens to undermine this goodwill and work at odds with development assistance.

Right now, three separate military commands serve Africa. AFRICOM would create a new unified command. This could - by itself - have a number of benefits. It would acknowledge the importance of Africa to the United States. Congress would receive an annual briefing from a four-star general tasked with improving the Department of Defense's understanding of the continent. Various military maps highlight so-called "ungoverned spaces" and Muslim countries as territories ripe for instability and terrorist recruitment. Judging by such misguided approaches to Africa, fresh expertise is desperately needed.

Africans are understandably doubtful about AFRICOM. Skepticism centers substantially on domestic opposition to military bases. Bush responded during his trip by calling these concerns "baloney." But the fact is that the U.S. has an astonishing 823 overseas bases. And the administration circumvented the Iraqi parliament when negotiating a U.N. mandate that would help legitimize a long term U.S. presence.

Concerns about bases partly inspired the 14 nations of the Southern African Development Community to announce that they will not allow U.S. soldiers on their soil. Liberia is the only country that has offered to host the command.

Only a few weeks after Bush's African odyssey, Gen. Kip Ward validated African concerns about U.S. bases. He testified to Congress that AFRICOM's headquarters in Germany was merely temporary. Then in a BBC interview he said, "Right now, there are no definite plans to take the headquarters or a portion of it to any particular location on the continent. Those things will come over time." Not this year, but eventually, he explained. Does that sound like baloney?

The administration is also sending conflicting messages about AFRICOM's missions. Assistant Secretary of Defense Theresa Whelan says AFRICOM will not involve the expansion of anti-terrorist military operations. "That isn't the purpose of this command in any way, shape or form." The command's transitional head shortly thereafter listed counterterrorism training and possible military action among possible future missions. The chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, Ike Skelton (D-Mo.), opened a hearing on AFRICOM by saying, "Africa is a theater in the war on terror."

AFRICOM's other proposed roles pose even more problems. New humanitarian missions will be coordinated by a civilian in the Pentagon. Even so, militarization of foreign aid would undermine the U.S. Agency for International Development and the credibility of aid overall. A recent study by the Center for Global Development argues that the Pentagon is ill suited to implement development assistance.

Thus the military is about to take on new missions - whether it wants them or not - with little debate.

Rep. Donald Payne (D-N.J.), the leading expert on Africa in the House, complained in August that "there has been no consultation" with his subcommittee about the establishment of AFRICOM.

There's good reason why they avoided him: Much of the Pentagon's paramilitary training would not be subject to the same human rights requirements mandated by the foreign assistance bills that annually go through his committee.

Congress should close this human rights loophole immediately and make sure that U.S. ambassadors have oversight of training by Special Forces. Congress should also demand clear answers to the Pentagon's equivocation about basing. Unpopular bases in Saudi Arabia and Iraq inspired homegrown opposition that turned violent. A more sensible counterterrorism policy and a more secure America depend on avoiding the same mistakes in Africa.

The success of the next president's foreign policy toward Africa will turn upon his or her ability to listen to frustrations about unpopular policies. When Nigeria's President Umaru Yar'Adua unexpectedly announced his support for AFRICOM during his visit to Washington, a political storm back home forced him to backtrack. Until the U.S. eliminates the secrecy and unilateralism in the war on terror, it will be unable to reconcile national security policy with the democratic demands facing African politicians.

The U.S. now risks awakening a new African nationalism that legitimately doubts the sincerity of American objectives. Emboldened by high primary-commodity prices and accountable to domestic constituencies that still remember the arbitrary oppression of colonialism, Africans are speaking their minds. America should listen.

Carl LeVan is an assistant professor in the School of International Service and co-chairman of American University's Council on African Studies. He co-edited *In Democracy's Shadow: the Secret World of National Security*.