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AFRICOM: A WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING?

Testimony by Mark Malan

Refugees International, Washington, DC

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"Exploring the U.S. Africa Command and a New Strategic Relationship with Africa."

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INTRODUCTION

I want to thank Senator Feingold most sincerely for inviting me to testify before this important and timely hearing. This is my first appearance before you, so please allow me a brief introduction. I am new to Washington DC and the USA, having joined Refugees International as head of their peacekeeping program this May. I shall do my best to convey to you the concerns about AFRICOM of RI and the broader humanitarian NGO community. However, as an African (I am a South African citizen) who has spent 20 years in the military and the last 11 years as a civilian working on African security and peacekeeping capacity-building issues, I shall first highlight some of the real concerns about AFRICOM that have been voiced rather loudly in Africa.

AFRICAN CONCERNS

Senator Feingold, you asked, in my letter of invitation, if I think there is any chance that AFRICOM could be perceived as a threat or somehow undermine US interests in Africa? The answer (to both parts of this question) is "yes". A quick glance at the titles of recent articles on AFRICOM in the African press indicates that the Command is indeed perceived as a threat:

"African states oppose US presence"; "North Africa Reluctant to Host U.S. Command"; "SADC shuns spectre of US Africom plans"; "Global Cop USA seeks more presence in

Africa”; “AFRICOM struggles to improve image of U.S.”; “The Americans Have Landed”; “The scramble for Africa's oil”; “Africa Rebukes Bush on African Command”; etc.

In some parts of the world, like Iraq and Afghanistan, the face of US foreign policy is clearly a military one. In Africa, the DoD appears to be putting a civilian mask on the face of a combatant command, with its marketing pitch for AFRICOM. This disingenuous strategy is not working. The veneer of the mask is simply too thin, and attempts to patch the holes that have emerged—by telling us “what AFRICOM is not about” and re-emphasizing a humanitarian and developmental role for the US military in Africa—simply make the face of US foreign policy much shadier.

The notion of a benign US combatant command is an enigma to those who clearly understand (and accept) the need for the US to secure access to Africa's natural resources, especially oil; and to establish bases from which to destroy networks linked to Al-Qaeda. When the US promotes a combatant military command in terms of development and humanitarianism, Africans will inevitably suspect that the true story is being kept from them.

According to its draft mission statement: *“US Africa Command promotes US National Security objectives by working with African states and regional organizations to help strengthen stability and security in the AOR. US Africa Command leads the in-theater DoD response to support other USG agencies in implementing USG security policies and strategies. In concert with other U.S. government and international partners, US Africa Command conducts theater security cooperation activities to assist in building security capacity and improve accountable governance. As directed, US Africa Command conducts military operations to deter aggression and respond to crises.”*

This is a clear, unambiguous and legitimate mission; one that should be understood and accepted by African leaders. Yet DoD officials continue to emphasize the non-military roles of AFRICOM. At a June 22 briefing, for example, Principal Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Ryan Henry, confirmed that AFRICOM’s primary missions include humanitarian assistance, civic action, and response to natural disasters. This kind of ‘messaging’ has amplified African concerns, creating the impression that the Pentagon is taking charge of US development policy and humanitarian assistance in Africa.

There is much sense in the argument for inter-agency cooperation; what does not make sense is linking this to a combatant command. According to one of Africa’s leading security analysts, AFRICOM should be orientated to an appropriate and clearly delineated role, with non-military issues kept outside of its grasp: “The much-vaunted inter-agency staff to be included in AFRICOM should be seen for what it is—the further co-option and subjugation of US foreign and development policy to a neocolonial agenda which is inimical to Africa and ironically, to the US itself.”

NGO CONCERNS

The main concern of operational NGOs is that AFRICOM will increase the trend towards the militarization of humanitarian action, which raises fundamental concerns about the purpose

of such assistance. Security objectives envisioned in the short term can run at cross purposes to the longer-term vision of creating stable and sustainable institutions that are accountable and responsive to the needs and aspirations of all segments of the population. Such concerns are amplified by the way AFRICOM is being presented as a tool for integrating US military, political, and humanitarian objectives under a unified *military* command. For example, Ryan Henry has emphasized that:

“[T]he deputy for the command ... will be a senior civilian from the State Department so that we can integrate with the diplomatic aspects. ... [we] will also have a large percentage of civilians from different parts of the U.S. government integrated into the command, because our engagement on the continent is one of diplomacy, of development and where we can be of assistance to Africans. And having an integrated staff will help us to do a better job in integrating with those other parts of the U.S. government's engagement.”

The specter of integration is unnerving for humanitarians; they cannot be supportive of the new command as long as AFRICOM portends to be a humanitarian actor and promises to subsume humanitarianism within the ambit of military strategy. Humanitarian action is more than the act of restoring basic living standards to individuals and communities who have been deprived of them by circumstance. It should be motivated by humanitarianism; a powerful assertion of the universal sanctity and dignity of human life, and a practical manifestation of the need to provide protection to civilians in times of crisis and conflict. It is underpinned by the principles of Humanity, Impartiality, and Independence—the observance of which is essential to maintaining the trust of all sides of a given conflict, and to maintaining access to victims. Strict observance of these ‘core principles’ is an essential guard against the use of humanitarian assistance to induce compliance with political demands, and upholding the principles demands constant vigilance against cooptation of the language of humanitarianism by political and military actors.

On the other hand, in Africa, mass displacement, hunger and disease is often the humanitarian fallout of political failures. In order to effectively address these challenges, there may well be a need for military strength and political direction, as well as humanitarian action; and few would contest the need for these three elements to collaborate in the field. Nevertheless, differences in philosophy and operational priorities mean that these three types of response do not naturally co-exist. There can at best be good liaison and perhaps coordination between humanitarian, developmental and military actors — but not integration. Even within United Nations peace operations, which are reliant on relatively weak voluntary troop contributions, there has been stiff resistance from humanitarians to the concept of ‘integrated missions’ in the field.

There are military rationales for soldiers to engage in limited projects that involve humanitarian or development-type activities. These are generally linked to issues of force protection and intelligence-gathering, and the general military aim of ‘winning hearts and minds’. The efficacy of such ‘humanitarian’ efforts is questionable, and should be debated from the standpoints of the military’s own objectives and with respect to concerns of the development and humanitarian community. There are obvious compelling practical, as well as moral, reasons for civilian institutions and civil society to undertake the vast majority of

such work. Agencies such as USAID as well as many large operational NGOs have far more experience than the military in implementing development and humanitarian programs. And they can do so at far lower cost than the military. Where the military is the only agency with the capacity to provide humanitarian and development assistance, the solution should lie in allocating adequate resources to USAID, rather than reinforcing and expanding the military's role in this sphere.

On the other hand, the US military is seen as an active or indirect belligerent in some contexts in Africa—for example, in the Horn of Africa. In such cases, militarization of development and humanitarian assistance can do grave damage by undermining respect for the impartiality and non-partisanship of the humanitarian mission. Moreover, although there has been some discussion, and even some agreement, about operational guidelines for interaction between civilian agencies and the US military in contexts such as Iraq and Afghanistan, there has been little progress in addressing the underlying policy questions about appropriate division of roles between US armed forces and humanitarian and development agencies.

The proposed integrated relationship between US foreign policy and US military strategy, emphasized in the AFRICOM briefs and concretized in the intention to appoint a civilian (State Department) Deputy to General Ward, has raised eyebrows within the Washington-based NGO community. There is concern about the uncooperative relationship between State and DoD and the fact that there is little substantive interagency collaboration. And there is deep suspicion that the \$750 million in separate funding that the DoD is seeking under the Building Global Partnerships Act is motivated partly by a desire for independence from Title 22 funding controlled by State (e.g. for IMET, FMF, and ACOTA). As demonstrated by the experiences of the UK, Canada, France, Germany and Sweden (as well as those of the USA), there are always tensions inherent in aligning security, diplomatic, and development efforts. Unlike most of these countries, however—where resources allocated to the departments of Defense, Foreign Affairs, and to International Development Agency are not grossly unequal—the resources of the US DoD dwarf those of the State Department and USAID. As with people, where tensions exist between organizations, the priorities of the stronger entity will overwhelm those of the weaker; thus the real fear that AFRICOM will marginalize and/or subordinate long-term development goals to short term political and security imperatives.

At a practical level, it is also very evident that neither USAID nor the Department of State (or any other civilian agency) has the funds or the personnel to fill the significant number of civilian posts envisioned for AFRICOM. Moreover, AFRICOM's regional, strategic structure, is likely to predominate over the country-based, more tactical and operational structure of the USAID missions. This, together with the fact that the regional expertise of State resides in Washington DC, not in Africa, is seen as a recipe for enabling a military lens to dominate any non-military tasks assigned to AFRICOM.

In short, the concerns of the humanitarian NGOs overlap with those of Africans—to the extent that they are both underpinned by the fear of the militarization of humanitarian and development assistance, as well as US policy in Africa. An obvious way to overcome such

concerns and enhance the credibility of the new combatant command, is to focus attention and effort on those non-combatant roles which are relevant, meaningful, and undeniably appropriate for the US military.

A SUPPORT ROLE FOR AFRICOM THAT DOES NOT BLUR CIVIL-MILITARY LINES AND ENCROACH ON HUMANITARIAN TERRAIN

Beyond military counter-terrorism priorities, AFRICOM should focus on two primary and unashamedly military support roles, namely a) defense sector reform, including civil-military relations; and b) support to building African peacekeeping and Standby Force capacity. These roles are indeed envisioned by the DoD, but they are not writ large at this point. The AFRICOM Transition Team website simply states that:

“AFRICOM is a headquarters staff whose mission entails coordinating the kind of support that will enable African governments and existing regional organizations, such as the African Standby Force, to have greater capacity to provide security and respond in times of need. AFRICOM will build on the many African-U.S. security cooperation activities already underway, yet be able to better coordinate DOD support with other U.S. government departments and agencies to make those activities even more effective.”

It is silent on the challenges of Security Sector Reform in Africa, and on the precise role that the US military, through AFRICOM, might play in building more professional armed forces and entrenching the democratic principle of civil supremacy over the military. Africa’s principal security challenge is to mobilize sufficient resources to provide a secure, stable, and well-governed environment characterized by the Rule of Law, in which human rights and civil liberties are protected and promoted—and where business can thrive. All African countries face a capacity deficit in their institutions of state, and the state is too often a predator rather than a facilitator. Since the 1960s, African armies have exhibited a tendency towards rapacious behavior, and the rebellions spawned in response have caused unimaginable suffering for civilians. African governments and civil society movements should therefore embrace AFRICOM support for defense transformation—if it is made clear that the approach will be collaborative and that assistance will be sustained over a long period through the mechanism of the new Command.

In the realm of defense sector reform, the importance of sustained external mentoring and commitment is well recognized and cannot be over-emphasized. The usefulness of a lead-nation rather than multinational approach has been demonstrated by the UK in Sierra Leone, as has the allocation of sufficient financial resources to do the job properly. On the other hand, there are many examples of perverse consequences of short-term US assistance to select African armies. AFRICOM should therefore demonstrate that it understands the role of military support within the broader sphere of Security Sector Reform (which includes the police and intelligence agencies as well as the judicial sector), that it is willing to provide sustained support to defense transformation in partner countries, and that it will have a secure funding mechanism to do so.

On the peacekeeping side, years of US assistance to Africa through ACRI, ACOTA and GPOI have not produced a viable and credible independent African peace operations capability. Rather, these programs bring home the fact that real capacity building is not a simple “train and equip” quick fix. Africa needs a demonstrable commitment by AFRICOM to provide long-term, sustainable support to developing African peacekeeping capabilities—for participating in UN peacekeeping, as well as African Union and regional operations.

There are 54,924 uniformed UN peacekeepers deployed in Africa – 17,393 of them are African. The UN is currently looking for an additional 20,000 peacekeepers to staff the proposed UN/AU hybrid mission in Darfur (to take over from a force of some 7,000 AU troops and police). Khartoum is insisting that the additional troops come from Africa, but Africa’s capacity and/or will to provide them is sadly lacking. In Somalia, 1,500 Ugandan troops have been deployed for several months in what was supposed to be an 8,000-strong AU mission in that country. They are still awaiting the arrival of an additional 6,500 troops to bring the mission up to authorized strength, while the AU is pleading with the UN to take over responsibility for the mission. UN officials, busy with contingency planning for a possible Somalia mission, are talking of a force level of 20,000. So there is an impending demand for an additional 40,000 peacekeepers in Africa, and little evidence to suggest that GPOI has created the necessary ready supply.

AFRICOM holds the promise of joining up current US military capacity-building programs such as GPOI, ACOTA, and IMET; and of evaluating and updating such programs to ensure their relevance, coherence and effectiveness in enhancing the quality and quantity of African troops who are readily available for peace operations. However, for an initiative that represents “the culmination of a 10-year thought process within the Department of Defense”, there is a surprising lack of detail on how AFRICOM intends to bridge African peacekeeping capacity gaps; gaps which are enormous and growing.

Beyond critical shortages in current and planned UN and AU missions, there are great expectations of the African Union being able to rapidly deploy an all-African standby force for future operations. In May 2003, the African Chiefs of Defense Staff produced a draft policy framework document on the establishment of an African Standby Force (ASF), which would be able to rapidly deploy when mandated to do so by the AU’s Peace and Security Council. The ASF is to consist of five regionally-managed brigades, located in Central, North, South, East, and West Africa. Each brigade is to be composed of police units, civilian specialists, 300-500 military observers, and 3,000-4,000 troops, bringing the proposed total stand-up capacity of the force to between 15,000-20,000 peacekeepers (which approximates, coincidentally, the number of troops being sought for Darfur, as well as Somalia). The ASF is supposed to be capable, by 2010, of undertaking a variety of operations, ranging from simpler observation and monitoring operations to interventions to halt ethnic cleansing or genocide.

This ideal is unlikely to be realized as long as the AU is bogged down in current, non-viable missions, and without a much higher level of concerted support to the ASF from partners such as the European Union and the USA. It is not simply troop numbers that are lacking; the AU mission in Darfur has revealed that the AU suffers from a lack of strategic management

capacity; has no effective mechanisms for operational level mission management; has insufficient logistic support and ability to manage logistics; lacks capacity in communication and information systems; and is totally dependent on external partners for technical advice and support.

AFRICOM can and should make a concerted effort to assist the AU in overcoming these critical capacity gaps. If this is indeed to be one of the major tasks of AFRICOM, then it would make sense for the Transition Team to exhibit some knowledge of the detail of the ASF Policy Framework and Implementation Roadmap, and to be actively discussing how AFRICOM may best lend support to the ASF—rather than hammering on humanitarian and developmental issues.

Moreover, it has been mentioned in DoD briefs that AFRICOM will play a “donor” coordination role. This should be regarded as a priority task, and be strongly emphasized in the emergent AFRICOM mandate. African leaders remain skeptical of donor assistance; at times, this skepticism has turned to resentment towards uncoordinated Western initiatives for enhancing African peacekeeping capabilities. In 1997, France, Britain and the USA attempted to address African sensitivities to the lack of coordination by announcing a ‘P3’ initiative, which was supposed to coordinate ongoing and future capacity-building efforts by the three powers. To date however, there has been little evidence of effective coordination between the P3; the initiative resulted in little more than mutual non-interference, rather than harmonization.

This is a serious shortcoming, among others because the AU and the sub-regional organizations in Africa lack the capacity to analyze and absorb the plethora of assistance initiatives emanating from the P3, the G8, the EU, the Nordic countries and others. With a four-star general at the helm and on the continent, AFRICOM would be uniquely poised to act as a focal point for liaison and coordination between African countries and organizations and their multiple peacekeeping capacity-building ‘partners’.

CONCLUSION

The establishment of AFRICOM and the transfer of geographical responsibility for Africa from EUCOM, CENTCOM, and PACOM hold great promise for a more joined-up approach to US military engagement with the continent. As Mr. Henry has put it, “...instead of having three commanders that deal with Africa as a third or fourth priority, we will have a single commander that deals with it day in and day out as his first and only priority ... that is the main reason for the stand-up of AFRICOM.” The new command should be welcomed by Africans on this ground alone. Informed, consistent and coherent engagement is far better than *ad hoc* US military engagement or retrenchment in Africa.

Better coordination of US Defense, Diplomatic and Development initiatives, and improved cooperation in the field should also be welcomed in Africa. Until such time as the real ability to coordinate and cooperate is demonstrated in Washington, however, the DoD would do well to expound upon AFRICOM’s military role, and let State and AID speak to issues of diplomacy and development.