

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH THERESA WHELAN,
DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR AFRICAN AFFAIRS SUBJECT:
CREATION OF U.S. AFRICAN COMMAND MODERATOR: CHARLES "JACK" HOLT,
CHIEF, NEW MEDIA OPERATIONS, OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF
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MS. WHELAN: Hi. This is Theresa Whelan.

MR. HOLT: Ms. Whelan, I'm Jack Holt with the Blogger's Roundtable. Thank you for
joining us today, and glad to have you with us.

MS. WHELAN: Sure.

MR. HOLT: Do you have an opening statement for us?

MS. WHELAN: Sure. I can give you sort of a real quick I guess overview of what we're
trying to do. And I figure you probably want to spend more time in Q & A than in listening to me
yak, so I'll try and be brief, to hit the highlights. You know, decision made by the president this
past February to have DOD reorganize itself and establish a new command, regional command to
complement our other regional commands -- the European Command, Central Command, Pacific
Command, et cetera.

Africa has never had its own regional command. It's always been subordinated -- in some
cases it was never even covered, and at other times it was subordinated under other commands.
Most recently, beginning in 1983, Africa was divided up among CENTCOM, Pacific Command --
PACOM, and European Command, with European Command having the bulk.

It's been like that since '83. That was really a function of the Cold War. It was a function of
how we looked at Africa, security issues in the context of the Cold War. The decision was made
that that was a suboptimal organizational structure for the current security environment and we
really needed to re-look it and establish a unified command that focused on Africa only and that we
didn't have three other commanders that were sort of distracted in their focus on Africa by the rest
of their portfolios. And of course, their portfolios -- European Command's portfolio, CENTCOM
command's portfolios, et cetera -- are not in any way insignificant, as you well know.

So in any case, that decision was made. In addition, since we were reorganizing ourselves, the decision was also made to rather than just go with the structures that we developed during the Cold War to address our Cold War organizational needs within the department that we would try and capture some of the lessons learned from the last decade-and-a-half in Africa, in the Balkans, in Afghanistan and Iraq, in terms of the need to work more closely with other U.S. government agencies in certain types of environments and kinds of environments that you find in Iraq or Afghanistan and Africa and places like that. And so we wanted to look at organizational mechanisms for enabling DOD to coordinate more closely, and so that's part of our new organizational structure. We'll be establishing those mechanisms, establishing closer linkages -- not so that we do their jobs but so that we have an ability to talk to them at more operational levels and get things done more efficiently and more effectively because of that.

The other thing that is new about this decision is the focus of the command's mission. Most of our unified commands, as you probably know, have as their primary mission essentially war fighting. SOUTHCOM is probably the one command that has an exception to that. And AFRICOM will in some ways be similar to the SOUTHCOM in that its mission will not be focused on war fighting. Its mission will be focused on building local security capacity in Africa and building partnerships with Africa in order to enable African nations to try and address their security challenges themselves, so that we don't get into situations where security challenges in Africa go unaddressed until the point they become such a major crisis that the international community, including the United States, is forced to respond. So the focus is essentially on security capacity building, not on war fighting. Those are some of the things that are new about this command, this organizational structure that we're developing -- our reorganization.

Things that are not new -- things that will stay the same: The first and most important thing is our overall security policy towards Africa doesn't change because we changed the organizational structure. What we're changing is how we do business, not what we do. And it is true, in Africa our focus has been basically around three issues -- three sort of -- we call them our pillars or the legs of the stool -- you can use whatever analogy you like. But they are -- and they are interrelated, so the legs of the stool is probably most applicable. But the first is civil control of the military and defense reform, which we see as sort of two sides of the same coin. The second is military professionalization, and the third is capacity building. And those three things are the things that DOD has been focused on in Africa for probably about the last 10 years. And those three things will continue to be DOD's focus in the context of capacity building and the mission of the command. So no changes there.

That's also consistent with the recent National Security Presidential Directive, NSPD 50, that was signed out by President Bush in September of 2006, providing an update to overall U.S. strategy towards Africa. This was the first update since 1992, and obviously a lot has happened in Africa -- a lot of changes, political and otherwise, since that time.

So our focus on those three things -- the reform, the professionalism and the capacity building -- will remain the same and is consistent with overall strategy.

Other things that will remain the same: Most importantly, of course, is the fact that the State Department remains in the lead on foreign policy. The fact that DOD is reorganizing itself internally and establishing a unified command for Africa does not mean that DOD becomes the foreign policy leader. And so State Department stays in the lead. The ambassadors on the ground in Africa will continue to hold their position as the president's representative, and therefore in those countries, they have the supreme authority from a U.S. standpoint in terms of what the U.S. does or doesn't do vis-a-vis those countries. And DOD will -- falls in line behind them and in support of them.

The other thing that doesn't change is that the Africans themselves remain in the lead in terms of determining how they want to structure their security relations with the United States and also how they want to structure their security relations internally to the continent -- whether it be on a continental basis through the A.U. or a regional basis through the regional economic communities like ECOWAS or (SATEC ?). They still have the lead in all of that. The fact that the United States has decided to, again, establish or reorganize its unified command system to have a command focused on Africa does not mean that the United States is in charge. It just means that we're organized differently and hopefully more effectively to do business with the Africans.

Lastly, the other thing that doesn't change is we are not going to be building new bases or putting troops, operational forces, on the continent. We have no intention of doing that. In fact, we've been spending the last five to seven years withdrawing a lot of troops from traditional places where we've had them based overseas, and we have no intention of reversing that and putting them in Africa. We will have presence on the continent, but that presence will be in the form of staff personnel in order to manage our relationships with African countries more effectively.

And I think I will go ahead and shut up and leave it to the Q & A from there.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Thank you, ma'am. Lot of things happening there.

Jason Seiger (sp), you were the first to call in, so why don't you get us started?

Q Thank you. Ms. Whelan, my name's Jason Seiger (sp). I'm with the Armchair Journalist blog. My question is, given that Africa certainly has a lot of turmoil with Darfur, the war with Ethiopia and diamond smuggling and all these other issues, is there any kind of a priority of near-term efforts with particular countries that you anticipate engaging -- any low-hanging fruit where you think there will be a more immediate return on investments over the next year with this new command?

MS. WHELAN: Well, I think in one sense the new command is going to be just sort of picking up, at the present time, what we're currently doing on the continent. And we are currently focused in working with countries like Nigeria, like Senegal, like Ghana, Botswana, et cetera, to help them build their capacity to participate in peacekeeping missions so that they can contribute to the A.U. mission in Darfur or elsewhere -- wherever the A.U. has peacekeeping missions -- and/or the U.N. mission. Now we have a hybrid mission in Darfur.

So we're going to continue to -- the command in the next year or so is going to continue to sort of focus on those efforts -- hopefully invigorate them, but not necessarily change them because I think they're very important.

The other thing I think that you will see, which has already begun, is an increased focus on maritime security, which we think is important. It's something that we hadn't really paid too much attention to for a while because we've been focusing more on the peacekeeping problem and sort of the turmoil -- the political and conflict turmoil on the continent. But maritime security is an area that's very important for the continent economically. I think the World Bank did a study not too long ago -- a couple of years ago -- in which they found that -- this was focused on the Mozambican Channel area off the coast of Tanzania and Mozambique -- but that countries like Mozambique were losing in excess of a billion dollars a year in lost revenue from illegal fishing and also the destruction to their reefs -- reef structures and also the depletion of their fishing resources. And so maritime security is important economically to African nations. It's also, though, important from a security standpoint because what we're seeing is more and more drugs being moved through Africa via maritime routes, arms being moved; there's trafficking in persons through maritime routes. And then of course there's piracy, which is influencing or impacting negatively on international shipping.

So that's something I think that is somewhat new in some ways that AFRICOM will be focusing on and that we think is important.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

And David?

Q Hi. This is David Axe of the Aviation Week group. Thanks a lot for taking the time to speak to us.

MS. WHELAN: Sure.

Q So -- (inaudible) -- this idea of building up the capacity of African militaries to handle peacekeeping. Would that apply to the Somalia problem as well?

MS. WHELAN: Sure. I mean, I think -- you know, I think in general the idea is that the African countries want to be able to try and address the security problems that they face in their own backyards. And their challenge that they have had is just simply not necessarily having the wherewithal to do so. And I think you've seen -- you know, with the establishment of the A.U. as a successful organization to the OAU and the A.U.'s plan of action in the area of security -- you've seen the desire, I think, that has been -- (audio difficulty) -- oops, do we still have everybody?

MR. HOLT: Yes.

MS. WHELAN: Okay. But you see this desire that has been growing, I think, since the early 90s when the Economic Community of West African States sort of made its first foray into multilateral security in Liberia. And this has become something that's important to the Africans, to be able to address these crises in their backyards so that they don't necessarily spread and become problems, you know, more broad, or larger problems.

So, yeah, if hopefully we would enable the A.U. to be able to better handle crises like Somalia, or Darfur, or Congo, Burundi, I mean, you know -- there's a whole host of them out there.

Q Can I follow up on that? But Somalia seems a little more complicated than some of the training and airlift support that's -- that U.S. forces have provided to, say, peacekeeping in Darfur, because, you know, a year ago with the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia there was direct U.S. action in support of that, with Special Forces gunships and whatnot. So that's surely going to be a part of AFRICOM, but despite this focus on new training and capacity-building, it seems -- their recent history indicates there'll be direct action as well.

MS. WHELAN: Well, your absolutely right with regard to the complexity of Somalia. Somalia, in some ways, defies the imagination in terms of its complexity, because of its political structure with the clans and subclan and sub-subclan system, and that, sort of, dominates their internal politics. And in some ways it even has defied the African ability, even the local neighborhood has had difficulty, helping the Somalis help themselves.

The solution in Somalia really isn't a military one, it's -- it is a political one. We, last year, did act kinetically. We struck a place against two terrorist targets -- well, actually they were folks that were enabling terrorists directly, and we struck because, of course, there -- no one else was in a position to strike, and these individuals had been involved, directly or indirectly, in the bombings of our embassy in Kenya and Tanzania, and also the subsequent action in Mombasa.

But that was completely separate, essentially, from the broader problem of instability and lack of governance in Somalia. That was just a, in some ways it was a symptom, the fact that these terrorists could find groups, Somali groups -- and Somalis that were willing to harbor them in Somalia, in terms of -- that was all sort of part of the Somali political game. But it isn't directly causing the chaos in Somalia. The chaos in Somalia is because the Somali -- various Somali clans can't seem to agree on how they want to govern themselves.

Q I'm trying to imagine, will there be groups similar to the PRTs and the MiTT teams that we see in Iraq and Afghanistan that will be, sort of, overseen by AFRICOM and sent out to various hot-spots to do this kind of governance and capacity-building?

MS. WHELAN: Well, I think that's -- the PRT is an interesting tool and it has proved, I think, useful in some circumstances. And it certainly should be a tool that I think we would want to include in our toolkit, but it would need to be applied in two specific circumstances where, you know, in, say, post-conflict scenario. In some cases, you know -- in most cases in Africa, actually, we will be focusing on maintaining and hopefully expanding our -- and "deepening" maybe is a better word, our existing military-to-military relations with African nations, stable African nations, that are trying to make a greater contribution to stability in their neighborhood and in the continent.

And so, you know, we don't need PRTs going to places like Senegal or whatnot. What we need -- what we need there is just continuing to work with the Senegalese military, or continuing to work with the Ghanaian military, or a number of the other militaries that we have partnerships with, training partnerships, to help them further hone their capacities so they can continue to contribute to missions like the ones in Darfur and Congo, et cetera.

In post-conflict scenarios, you know, whether or not the United States would have a direct role would really depend on U.S. foreign policy towards that particular crisis area at that time. And so, you know, I don't -- I don't want to say that we either, you know, would be sending out PRTs, or that we wouldn't be sending out PRTs, because -- but it is an interesting tool and it has proven useful in Afghanistan. And there could be circumstances in Africa where the PRT model might be applicable.

Q Great. Thanks a lot. Do you folks mind if I -- if I just throw one more question out there?

MR. HOLT: No, go ahead.

Q Okay, great, you guys, thanks. But how do we -- how do we avoid the, perhaps paranoid accusations we might get from some -- from some quarters that AFRICOM represents this sort of behind-the-scenes skulking to orchestrate puppet wars --

MS. WHELAN: (Laughs.)

Q -- (inaudible) -- I mean surely, surely there's a huge public relations -- the potential for problems here.

MS. WHELAN: Oh, yeah -- no, no, I totally agree. And you almost, -- unfortunately you can't avoid it, people are going to believe what they want to believe.

You know, for years -- beginning in the late 1980s and through the mid-1990s we were accused of building a secret air base in Botswana. And no matter what we said, how many times we said it, we just could not kill that rumor. And there's no secret air base in Botswana, you guys can go look (laughs).

Now there was an air base that the BDF was building along with the French -- a French company was building it, but it has nothing to do with the United States. And we kept trying to say that, but nobody would listen to us. They continued to believe that somehow we were nefariously involved in some skullduggery in Botswana.

So, you know, in some senses, it's very difficult to prove a negative. Certainly, you know, I can -- I can talk to guys like you and I can say, hey, that's not what we're up to here. Whether or not you believe me, you know, obviously is up to you. And hopefully you do because I'm not trying to, you know, sell you a load of bull.

But I think, ultimately, what it's going to come down to is what we do on the ground. And I think our actions, you know -- it's a trite phrase but probably very true, our actions are ultimately going to speak louder than our words.

Q Thank you very much.

MS. WHELAN: Sure.

MR. HOLT: All right.

And Andrew.

Q Ms. Whelan, Andrew Lubin from U.S. Cavalry ON Point. I appreciate you taking the time to speak with us today.

When AFRICOM was announced, the immediate reaction in the mainstream media from the African countries was basically: not interested; not here; don't put it next to us. So if we're going to spend the time and effort to work on their military and get them more professional -- the African Union is a horrendous force, most of the time they make the news because of rape, selling drugs and other assorted problems -- what are we doing to, if that's the military they're putting out, how can we change that? If they don't even want you on the ground to help them change that? MS. WHELAN: Yeah, well I think there's -- there's a couple parts to that. First, it actually -- despite what came out in the African media, and what you should note, you know, about the "African media," quote unquote, is it tends to be incestuous. They pick up the same story and repeat it over and over. It's not necessarily a very sophisticated media environment out there and it also tends to be dominated by -- in the West Africa area, the Nigerian media; Southern Africa, the South African media; and in East, the Kenyan media. And they all tend to deal in rumor oftentimes more than fact.

So, you know, there's a certain credibility gap there in some sense. But, that said, yeah, they're out there and they're the same people that, you know, spread the stories about our secret air base in Botswana years ago, and said that it was fact. But the fact -- the truth is that, on a bilateral basis, in our interactions with the African countries, no African country has said to us, "No, we do not want to have mil-to-mil relations with you." In fact, they all want to have more mil-to-mil relations with us. They want more training, more access, more stuff -- and granted, a lot of it, you know, sometimes has to do with getting "things" from us.

But nonetheless, I think the point is that no African countries, or very -- very, very very few, are pushing us away and saying, "We do not want to have professional military-to-military relationships with the United States." So I think that's sort of the basis, and what we've been trying to get people to understand is that AFRICOM is simply a tool to manage those professional military-to-military relationships. And in the context of the -- and recall that, of course, the African Union, like the U.N. or NATO, or any other multilateral organization, is simply, it is its member states. So the African Union itself doesn't have a force, per se, it has -- it has member states who contribute to multilateral missions that the African Union has sanctioned, much as, you know, the U.N. sanctions peacekeeping missions.

And yes, some of those African countries that contribute to those missions, their troops are less-than-appropriately disciplined. And that goes back, of course, to our, you know, one of the legs of the stool that I talked about, "the military professionalization." And this comes, really, just from a lack of training and a lack of education.

And a good example of how those problems can be fixed is Nigeria and a program that we put on in 2000 to 2002 timeframe called "Operation Focus Relief." It was a response to the debacle in Sierra Leone with the U.N. in 2000. And the Nigerians volunteered to send five additional battalions to Sierra Leone, the Senegalese one, and the Ghanaians one, if they could be equipped.

We volunteered to equip all seven battalions but that equipment had to come with training. The Nigerians were very reluctant but they had to accept it if they wanted the equipment. The U.N. and the U.K. were even more reluctant because the Nigerians were the "bad boys" of international peacekeeping. I mean, if there was a poster-child for a bad-boy peacekeeping force, it was Nigeria.

So we went in there. The SF guys did it. They asked for 16 weeks. We could only give them 10 because we had to get these guys moving into Sierra Leone to address the problem. And in 10 weeks they turned five essentially bad-boy battalions into good, solid C students. And that was even an assessment that came out of the U.N. and the UK, that the Nigerian units that we trained performed -- while they didn't, you know, perform exceptionally -- you wouldn't give them an A+ - - you would definitely give them a solid C, C+, you know, B-, maybe, grade in terms of their performance. They had completely turned around.

And what it shows, and even what our SF guys said, based on working with them and training with them, is that these guys just hadn't -- they hadn't heard about this stuff before. Nobody had ever talked to them about their responsibilities vis-a-vis the civilian populace. Nobody had ever talked to them and told them that there were laws of war and that they had to abide by those laws as professional soldiers and things like that.

So, you know, based on that -- granted, it's anecdotal, but I think, given that they were so bad, it's a good anecdote -- it is possible to help these militaries become more professional, and therefore you have a reduction in abuses in the field.

Q If I could follow up, guys, because I think we have time. I guess the poster child we all need to talk about is Zimbabwe. What is AFRICOM -- what can you do?

MS. WHELAN: Ah, well, actually, that's a case where, you know, there's really nothing that -- that is not a problem that lends itself to a military solution. That is purely -- that is a political problem within Zimbabwe, and it is one that the Zimbabweans have to solve themselves, and maybe with a little help from their neighbors.

You know, certainly there's room for international diplomatic pressure on the government of Zimbabwe to change its behavior, although unfortunately they seem to have been somewhat immune to that kind of pressure. But that is one of those incredibly sad cases where there isn't

really much anyone other than Zimbabweans can do about it. And it certainly is not a problem that falls into the military solution set.

Q Okay, thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And Paul.

Q Hi. Paul McCleary, Columbia Journalism Review. I have two questions that are kind of interrelated. I've heard reports that AFRICOM is considering having multiple headquarters across the continent; the area is so wide and there are so many different countries. And even if you're only going to have one headquarters, with the massive scope of the program -- and, you know, you say that you're not going to put any more troops in Africa -- how much are you planning on outsourcing this to private contractors?

MS. WHELAN: AFRICOM isn't going to be, you know, outsourced to private contractors. The mil-to-mil relations, really, are just that. You know, it's not contractor to military relations. It's, you know, U.S. military to other militaries. And so while there may be contractors, you know, managing computers and doing budgets or something in the back room, essentially this isn't a contract endeavor for us. It is a DOD organizational structure and it will be run essentially by the U.S. military.

As far as, you know, what we've called our sort of distributed headquarters concept, yeah, you're right; it's not multiple headquarters. It's a single headquarters, essentially, but the location of its elements will be distributed.

So instead of having, you know, a multistory building with somebody on the fifth floor and the third floor and the what, you will have the people on the different floors essentially distributed to different regional locations in order to try and deal with the tyranny of distance. But we -- and corporate America has done this already.

And we think that if it can work for corporations, we can probably figure out a way to make it work for DOD.

So that's one of the ways that we're going to try and overcome the tyranny of distance, and also try to acknowledge the fact that different regions of the continent have really different issues and challenges that they're dealing with on the security side, and one size doesn't fit all. So by having a presence in each region, we will hopefully be able to understand and appreciate the differences and the nuances and try and work with the countries in those regions to address their specific challenges and problems.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

And Clay.

Q Yes, Secretary Whelan, I was wondering if you could comment on U.S. policy towards Eritrea. I know this is a State Department prerogative, but there's been talk of designating Eritrea

as a state sponsor of terrorism. And I was just curious if there had been any further progress on that front.

MS. WHELAN: No, there's been no -- as far as I'm aware -- and that really is a State Department issue; they make that determination based on information, you know, available. And I am not aware that any decisions have been taken in that regard.

Q Okay. And I just wanted to follow up. What kind of role do you foresee for AFRICOM in HIV-AIDS prevention?

MS. WHELAN: Well, you know, DOD has programs already that we run with African militaries to promote, you know, education awareness and good practices with regard to HIV-AIDS, and also testing. We do not -- in the DOD programs, we do not provide treatment because our programs are small, and so we don't have sufficient money to do so, although we have partnered with the president's program, the PEPFAR program, for AIDS relief, and so, in some cases, have provided some treatment options in partnering with those.

And those programs will continue, assuming Congress continues to give us the funding for them. We think that they are very useful programs, not only in helping address the HIV-AIDS problem in the military, which was an area that was neglected -- the civilian donor community and medical community tended, of course, to focus on civilians, very important, but the military was an important segment of society and oftentimes a vector that was not being addressed sufficiently until we came along and began to address it.

We addressed it because obviously it's an issue in terms of military readiness. If you've got large percentages of your military population who cannot show up for work on any given day because they are suffering some of the symptoms of the disease, that doesn't do much in terms of your military capacity.

But it's also been a way for us to build military-to-military relations, talking about having soldiers and others talking together about the challenge of this disease. So we very much -- as long as we have the funding, AFRICOM will continue to implement that program in Africa.

Q Okay, thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right. Any follow-up questions?

Q Yes, I do. Andrew Lubin again, Secretary Whelan, from OnPoint.

MR. HOLT: Sure.

Q If, in the near future or whatever, you have a Rwanda situation, Tutsis versus the Tutus, would we get involved with AFRICOM now?

MS. WHELAN: Well, that really, I think, depends on the overall U.S. foreign policy. I mean, certainly AFRICOM becomes a part of the U.S. tool kit. But, you know, EUCOM was there,

and EUCOM had responsibility for that area in the last go-round. So now, yes, we would have a single command that would be more focused.

I am sure that if there was a decision, say, on the part of the African Union to try and address that problem locally and use regional militaries to try and address it, that, you know, we might be helpful to those militaries, just as we are right now in, say, helping the Rwandans. We're actually currently airlifting the Rwandans into Darfur. We're doing a rotation. We've been doing the airlift rotations for them for a couple of years now.

So we could very well get involved in that sense, in supporting the Africans. And if the president takes a decision to involve the United States more directly in that kind of scenario, then obviously the Africa Command would have the operational lead from a DOD perspective.

Q Okay, thank you very much. MS. WHELAN: Sure.

MR. HOLT: All right --

Q This is David Axe. Can I follow up?

MR. HOLT: Sure.

Q Oh, okay, great. This is David Axe again from -- (inaudible).

So it seems to me like this whole scheme is going to require a pretty robust logistics infrastructure, especially for airlift, you know, getting people and stuff out to widespread locations. Does that infrastructure exist, or will we need to be building any of that?

MS. WHELAN: Well, I think, you know, you're absolutely right with regard to movement. And that is one thing that we're looking at right now. In order to facilitate the command's conduct of its mission, it's going to need to be able to move around the continent. And since commercial airlines are not all that reliable in many areas of the continent, we're probably going to have to provide our own transportation support. So that's definitely there.

The other piece that we're going to have to build in is communications. The communications pipelines in and out and around the continent are not necessarily up to the kinds of standards that we would need in order to fulfill our command-and-control responsibilities. So that's going to be infrastructure that's going to have to be built.

There's probably some physical infrastructure that might need to be built in certain places, depending upon how many people we -- you know, how many staff personnel we have in any given place. So, yeah, infrastructure is definitely going to be an issue as we sort of move forward and as we look to putting more staff personnel on the continent than we currently have right now.

MR. HOLT: Okay, thank you very much.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Thank you very much, Ms. Whelan. I thank you very much for being with us today for the Bloggers' Roundtable. We appreciate it very much. And do you have any closing statements or closing comments for us?

MS. WHELAN: No, I think that'll do it for me.

MR. HOLT: I think you pretty much covered it here. Thank you very much for being with us, and hopefully we can speak again.

MS. WHELAN: Okay, thank you. END.