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OFFICIAL OPENING CEREMONY OF THE WEST AFRICA DISASTER PREPAREDNESS INITIATIVE

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The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC) and the Republic of Ghana National Disaster Management Organisation (NADMO), supported by the U.S. Africa Command (USAFRICOM) Operation United Assistance (OUA) Transition Disaster Preparedness Project, successfully concluded the Official Opening Ceremony of the West Africa Disaster Preparedness Initiative (WADPI) on 13 July 2015 in Accra, Ghana.

More than 150 distinguished representatives from 15 West African partner nations, U.S. Government agencies and international organizations gathered first at NADMO for the commissioning of the National Emergency Operations Centre (NEOC) and later, at the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Centre for the official commencement of the initiative.

Hon. Akwasi Opong Fosu provided the keynote address on behalf of the President of the Republic of Ghana. He stressed that “acquiring a more sophisticated system in responding to emergencies must not be an option but an obligation” of any government to its people.

Ghana’s NEOC, designed and constructed with support from North Dakota National Guard through the USAFRICOM State Partnership Program (SPP), aims at improving the coordination of emergencies in Ghana, to include the recent, tragic flood and fire disaster in downtown Accra. The NEOC is equipped with emergency web lines to enable receipt of live, first-hand information to improve response time and coordination at both the local and national levels.

Other high-level speakers at the commissioning and ribbon cutting ceremony for the Republic of Ghana’s National Emergency Operations Centre were Ms. C. Patricia Alsup, Chargé d’Affairs, United States Embassy – Accra; Hon. Akwasi Opong Fosu, Minister of State at the Presidency; Sir (Dr.) Ebenezer Kofi Portuphy, Former National Coordinator, NADMO; David A. Sprynczynatyk, North Dakota Adjutant General; and Brig Gen Francis Vib-Sanziri, Acting National Coordinator, NADMO.

Later in the day, participants transitioned to KAIPTC for the Official Opening Ceremony for the West Africa Disaster Preparedness Initiative whose primary objective is to utilize lessons learned from the recent Ebola epidemic to strengthen national capacities among 17 Partner Nations (PNs) in the West African region to implement an all-hazards

approach to disaster preparedness and response management while also promoting continued regional collaboration, communication and coordination.

Major General Obed Boamah Akwa, Commandant, KAIPTC; Mr. Ahmed Tidiane Traore, Technical Advisor, Mano River Union; Dr. Barbara Sotirin, J5 Deputy Director for Programs, USAFRICOM; and Honourable Fritz Baffour, Chairman of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Defence and Interior, provided welcoming remarks and spoke to the importance of ongoing regional collaboration and partnership.

Other senior officials in attendance included Ambassador Kone Tanou, ECOWAS Ambassador to the UN, Dr. David Smith, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence for Health Affairs and Major General Gretchen Dunkelberger, ANG Assistant to the Surgeon General.

The opening ceremony marked the commencement of an initiative which will see 17 African Partner Nations¹ complete a one week of plan development sessions as well as two weeks of awareness training to identify strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities in existing disaster management capabilities in order to enhance future disaster response efforts and regional collaboration.

Dr. Barbara Sotirin reiterated the importance of bilateral partnership through continued relationship building and reaffirmed USAFRICOM's commitment to, "continue assisting African nations with disaster preparedness and response planning."

Activities over the course of the initiative will highlight areas for future regional cooperation and create a network of African leaders and experts who will spearhead follow-on activities. Dr. Sotirin further stated it is critically important to collaborate closely with neighboring countries and regional partners, as many times disaster response challenges require a synergy of both local resilience and national and regional capacity.

Following a one week intensive plan development session, participants will be grouped into three lanes of effort consisting of a Health Track, an Operations Track, and a Composite Track which encompasses topics on logistics, security, and humanitarian operations. Awareness training sessions will be co-led by U.S. and African subject matter experts from Nigeria, Senegal, Benin, Kenya, and Ghana.

Awareness trainings will be tailored to the specific needs of each country but will include topics such as "Ebola Awareness and First Responder Training," "Review and Validation of National Emergency Operations Center (NEOCs) Standard Operating Procedures," "Emergency Operations Center Management and Incident Command Structure," "Review and Validation of National Disaster Preparedness and Response Plans," and "Logistics, Security, and Communication During Disasters."

Throughout the coursework, a key emphasis will be placed on fostering collaboration and

¹ Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Chad, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo

communication across the West African region. Col. Kennedy Osemwegie of Nigeria serves as the course director on behalf of KAIPTC guiding both the development and the implementation of the curriculum. Ultimately, the goal of the program is to increase resiliency and strengthen national capacities across the African continent through the creation of an agenda for future sustainable programming in support of this objective.

“Training efforts will focus on building the capacity of officials responsible for disaster preparedness and management regarding the lessons learned from the current Ebola crisis and to establish a foundation for a national-level, systems-based approach to preparedness,” noted Col. Kennedy Osemwegie, Director of Training, KAIPTC. He further stated, “we do have a herculean task ahead of us, however, I do believe also that with the local expertise available on the continent and the support of our implementing partners, we all shall make WADPI a success.”

The West Africa Disaster Preparedness Initiative is sponsored by USAFRICOM’s Operation United Assistance (OUA) Transition Disaster Preparedness Project. Implementing Partners include ECOWAS, KAIPTC, NADMO, the Center for Disaster and Humanitarian Assistance Medicine (CDHAM), The Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) CBRN Preparedness Program (CP2), Defense Institute for Medical Operations (DIMO) and others.