

# Notes on U.S. Africa Command Operations in Mali

*Andrea Walther*

## **Abstract**

**I**n November 2008, Andrea Walther spent two weeks deployed with the U.S. Joint Special Operations Task Force-Trans Sahara in Bamako, Mali, for Operation Flintlock. Flintlock is a bi-annual military training exercise run by U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) that seeks to train West African Special Forces units in counterterrorism techniques. While in Bamako, Andrea interviewed various members of the U.S. Country Team as part of her master's thesis, which examines whether current U.S. counterterrorism policies in the Sahel adequately address the regional, continental, and international security threats that exist in the region.

As I boarded the plane to Mali, I asked myself what on earth I thought I was doing. I was getting on a flight back to West Africa, a region that had almost taken my life in a terrible malaria relapse three months prior. I would be accompanying American, African, and European Special Forces units for two weeks as they conducted a bi-annual counterterrorism training exercise. I was departing with no real pre-trip guidance on how, where, and under what conditions I would be operating; as far as I knew, I was going to be the only civilian at the exercise besides local media outlets.

The purpose of my trip was to observe the day-to-day exercises and conduct interviews on the military's increasing involvement with humanitarian aid, civil engineering projects, and medical support missions in Africa. I had been unofficially assigned by the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) Public Affairs Office to take photos and interview soldiers and bystanders for several internal Armed Forces publications. Of the approximately five hundred American and international personnel involved in the military-to-military counterterrorism training operation, I turned out to be one of

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**Andrea Walther** is a MALD candidate at The Fletcher School where she is concentrating in International Security Studies. Prior to Fletcher, Andrea worked for Mayor Cory Booker and the City of Newark, New Jersey's Office of Homeland Security, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the United Nations Security Council. During her time at Fletcher, Andrea has focused on the expanding role of the Department of Defense in Sub-Saharan Africa and the U.S. government's '3D' (diplomacy, development, and defense) work in the region.

five women. Two I rarely saw as they were enlisted in the Air Force. The remaining two interacted with the local and international media as Public Affairs Officers with Special Operations Command.

I had initially received an invitation to attend Operation Flintlock from the AFRICOM Civil Affairs Unit after conducting thesis research at the combatant command headquarters in Stuttgart, Germany during the previous summer. AFRICOM has a different mission than other U.S. military commands—one of war-preventing rather than war-fighting. AFRICOM helps build capacity in partner African nations and utilizes reconstruction and development assistance as a soft-power tool to promote stabilization and security. U.S. efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan have indicated that security is a precondition for development and that the failure of development can lead to insecurity.

In Mali, I gained a firsthand view of the military's tactical and operational counterterrorism training. Each morning, I helped the AFRICOM Public Affairs Office to train their Malian counterparts. Daily instruction focused on effective crisis and disaster communication protocol within the hierarchical military structure and the civilian chain of leadership. We also promoted transparency in the military's training and activities. The Public Affairs Office opened a Coalition Press Information Center to emphasize the benefits of maintaining a strong relationship with outside media. In the afternoons, I would accompany American, Dutch, and German Special Forces Units as they trained Malian and Senegalese commandos in basic rifle marksmanship, infantry skills, combat, and reconnaissance patrol. The training teams also conducted urban situational exercises, which consisted of using mock houses to teach search and clearing techniques.

During the three-week exercise, the most enjoyable event was the day-long Medical Civic Action Program (MEDCAP). As I got out of our SUV at the Bamako Air Force Infirmary that morning, I stopped in my tracks and immediately grabbed my camera to capture the image before me: hundreds of people streamed in from every direction and milled around the clinic. At first glance, it appeared as if there was a gigantic freestanding mass of people, but actually it was a serpentine line, coiling multiple times around the building. In the broiling sun, people shifted back and forth, fanning themselves and waiting for assistance. Two U.S. Air Force officers walked down the line handing out vitamin infused crackers to waiting children and distributing numbered cards to ensure that the line moved in an orderly manner.

As I walked inside the clinic to observe the treatment process, I passed by an intake table where another officer gave children older than two years of age a tiny cupful of liquid medication to combat intestinal worm infestation, which widely afflicts children in the Bamako capital region. Once inside, most patients exhibited a variety of symptoms for malaria, pneumonia, skin rashes, and various infections. In the six examination rooms, two translators were necessary: one to translate from the local dialect, Bambara, to French, and another for French to English, as the majority of the population only spoke Bambara. Due to the limited number of Air Force linguists, the first translator was almost always a Malian soldier and the second an Air Force transla-

tor. As soon as the medics found out that I could speak French, they immediately put me to work translating in one of the rooms.

When I asked the U.S. Air Force officers how they felt taking part in these recent humanitarian mission assignments, they proudly informed me that MEDCAP missions are not a new concept for the military, nor are they unique to the U.S. Armed Forces. Members of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have already incorporated MEDCAP missions into peacemaking and peacekeeping operations around the world, including in Afghanistan, the Balkans, and Iraq. During the past ten years, the U.S. has organized MEDCAPs in Croatia, Haiti, Somalia, Bosnia, Albania, and Yugoslavia. The creation of U.S. AFRICOM has increased the number and frequency of MEDCAPs conducted in Africa.

Though the doctors at the MEDCAP worked through a constantly growing line of patients for nearly nine hours straight, the local women expressed frustration that only eight of the surrounding towns were being assisted. This MEDCAP had been conducted in an ad hoc manner as the medical supplies utilized for the day's treatments had been extra supplies, left over from a larger MEDCAP held a few months earlier.

I felt that the Air Force medics were going above and beyond their duty by adding an extra MEDCAP to the exercise, but I questioned whether it was a positive thing that these additional resources went to a clinic that served mostly military families. What message was this giving to the rest of the population—that military families deserve priority and preferential treatment? Unfortunately the outreach regarding this MEDCAP was not as thoroughly conducted as those planned months ahead.

As the MEDCAP drew to a close, the Air Force medics had seen over four-hundred townspeople and donated \$275,000 worth of medical supplies for the local clinic to use during the next few months. While one clear benefit of MEDCAPs is that they provide medical care and supplies to local populations who would not otherwise receive them, the exercise's fundamental objective is to provide training opportunities for U.S. military medics and staff. MEDCAPs also offer the opportunity for U.S. military medics to gain a better understanding of an individual country's medical assets and capabilities, or lack thereof. Finally, these exercises represent an effort to instill confidence in local citizens with respect to the U.S. Armed Forces, and to strengthen relations between the U.S. and its partner nations; the two elements are better known as the "hearts and minds" campaign. By the end of my two-week trip, I left with a deeper understanding of the immense magnitude of both the military and humanitarian sides of the operation.

I also better understood why the Malian government was so accepting of the U.S.'s increasing presence in their country. With only 10,000 people in its military and other security forces, and just two working helicopters and a few airplanes, Mali's military has the potential to benefit greatly from U.S. military capacity-building exercises such as Operation Flintlock. The country's annual defense spending is \$130 million, which is eight percent of total government spending. Though the government is a relatively stable democracy, it is still fragile and faces threats from an extremist Al Qaeda off-

shoot group, which operates in the northern Malian desert. Some mid- and senior-level military officers with whom I spoke believed that, due to their country's vast size and its comparatively small military and equipment, Mali's capacity to contain these threats without outside help is limited.

The threat posed by terrorist networks, the challenge of newly-discovered natural resources, and China's growing role in Africa have all prompted the U.S. to acknowledge the African continent's growing strategic importance. The recently increasing presence of the U.S. Armed Forces in Africa, under the auspices of AFRICOM, is reflective of this national security reassessment and the increased global strategic importance of Africa. Not everyone, however, equally supports these changes. The increased presence of the U.S. military in the humanitarian sphere is very controversial. Critics question the motive behind military involvement in activities such as painting schools, drilling wells, and building roads, arguing that the military is blurring the line between security and development, and shrinking the humanitarian space.

Many non-military people fear that the large increase in the Department of Defense's resources devoted to AFRICOM will allow the Pentagon to influence U.S. foreign policy towards Africa. There are many implications to this policy shift. First, the State Department is supposed to be the federal department which establishes U.S. foreign policy, and the Defense Department works to implement it—not the other way around. Combating and overcoming current global threats necessitates a comprehensive national security strategy, which incorporates balanced tools of diplomacy, defense, and development. Unfortunately, the U.S. national security strategy currently supports this policy on paper but not financially or programmatically. There is a massive imbalance between the budgets of the Defense Department and the State Department. The defense budget dwarfs that of civilian agencies for global engagement by a factor of approximately seventeen to one.<sup>1</sup> Control of development assistance resources is another critical element of the Defense Department's policy shift towards Africa. Between 2002 and 2005, the Pentagon increased its control of development assistance six-fold, from 5.6% to 21.7%,<sup>2</sup> while the percentage controlled by USAID shrunk from 65% to 40%.<sup>3</sup> This is because the Defense Department has been granted temporary authority by Congress to provide "non-traditional security assistance" for prevention purposes, with guidelines for use in environments where civilian actors have difficulty operating or where civilian capacity is weak.

There is also a large imbalance in the human resources allocated to each department. The increase in Defense Department personnel assigned to AFRICOM is occurring at a time when the State Department and USAID offices on the continent are both grossly understaffed and underfunded as a result of the heavy personnel and budgetary demands at the U.S. embassies in Iraq and Afghanistan. Although the U.S. military (including the Coast Guard and the reserve component) has over 2.5 million uniformed personnel and over 10,100 civilian employees, the State Department and USAID together only have 8,521 permanent employees.<sup>4</sup> Proponents of the Defense Department's increased role in humanitarian and development activities argue that

the need exists and the Defense Department is the only one with sufficient funding and manpower to address it.

Additionally, the motives for implementing development-related projects differ greatly between the Defense Department and USAID. For example, if USAID conducted an assessment of health needs in Mali, the project proposal would be evaluated based on how well it would serve the population most in need of particular supplies and assistance. A Defense Department assessment, on the other hand, would evaluate how a donation of medical supplies could best support U.S. national security objectives. In addition to differences in mandate, those assessing and implementing these programs possess distinct backgrounds, training, and skill sets. In a country with a per capita income of \$460 (in 2007), the decision of where and when to donate such a large amount of supplies has serious ramifications. The differing mandates and skills of each department alter how such a decision is made and the outcome that is reached.<sup>5</sup>

Though the Defense Department's role in Africa may be growing, based on my own personal experiences at Operation Flintlock, I do not see this growth as an effort to expand its role into the traditional domains of the State Department and USAID. In speaking with individuals at the operational, strategic, and tactical level, from defense leadership down to the rank and file soldier, the U.S. Armed Forces are quite vocal in supporting an increase of financial and personnel resources for the State Department and USAID—which they believe is needed to better perform each department's respective mission.

As my two weeks came to a close, I found myself once again slowly waiting in line to board my return flight to Boston. Dust started swirling all around me and two Malian women standing behind me gasped audibly. I looked up to see one pointing in the distance at a dull-gray rotor-blade transport aircraft, which was making a vertical descent further down onto the airstrip, rotors whomp-whomping. In French, she wondered aloud how Mali could afford such an “advanced air force.” I smiled and said in my best French that they were actually U.S., European, and West African Special Forces Units conducting joint military and humanitarian training operations. Grinning, she replied that she was quite proud that the U.S. was interested in conducting such training exercises with her own country of Mali.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Mark Malan, “U.S. Civil-Military Imbalance for Global Engagement; Lessons from the Operational Level in Africa,” *Refugees International*, July 2008, II.
- 2 Stephen J. Morrison and Kathleen Hicks, “Integrating 21st Century Development and Security Assistance,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 2008, vi.
- 3 Malan, I.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 1.
- 5 World Bank, “Mali at a Glance 2007,” <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/AFRICAEXT/MALIEXTN/0,,menuPK:362209~pagePK:141132~piPK:141109~theSitePK:362183,00.html>.