

The Pentagon's Last Frontier: Battle-Hardened Troops Headed To Africa

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After the U.S. begins to wind down more than ten consecutive years of combat, mainly counterinsurgency, operations in what has variously been labeled the Broader, Greater and New Middle East, war-tested troops are being prepared for redeployment to Africa and Latin (largely South) America.*

Last September President Barack Obama hailed the five million U.S. soldiers that have served in the so-called global war on terror, what he called the 9/11 generation, in the preceding decade.

American commanders issue regular statements that war-time experience in Afghanistan and Iraq has trained the armed forces for new operations in other parts of the world: Africa, Latin America, those parts of the Middle East so far not undermined and attacked, the Balkans-Black Sea-Caucasus arc and the Asia-Pacific region.

On June 8 the Gannett newspaper chain's Army Times cited the commander of U.S. Army Africa, Major General David Hogg, disclosing that a brigade-size force of U.S. troops – 3,000 “and likely more” – will begin regular deployments to the African continent beginning next year.

As a component of U.S. Army Africa's “regionally aligned force concept,” the American military personnel will concentrate on training the armed forces of U.S. Africa Command's new military allies – which have grown to include all 54 African nations except for Eritrea, Sudan and Zimbabwe after the overthrow of the governments of Ivory Coast and Libya last year – and, in Pentagonese, to advise, assist, partner, enable and mentor in counterinsurgency campaigns like those currently underway in Mali, Somalia and Central Africa.

As Africa is (along with South America) alone in not yet being the site of extensive and sustained U.S. military deployments, according to Hogg “As far as our mission goes, it's uncharted territory”; in the words of Army Times, Africa is “the Army's last frontier.”

The latter source stated the initial 3,000-troop- plus initiative is “a pilot program that assigns brigades on a rotational basis to regions around the globe.”

U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) is a unified combatant command whose respective components are U.S. Army Africa (based in Vicenza, Italy), U.S. Naval Forces Africa (Naples, Italy), U.S. Air Forces Africa (Ramstein Air Base, Germany), U.S. Marine Corps Forces Africa and U.S. Special Operations Command Africa (the last two at the Kelley Barracks in Stuttgart, Germany where AFRICOM headquarters is located).

It has taken over regular U.S. military training and other exercises in Africa like Operation Flintlock, Africa Endeavor, Natural Fire and African Lion. This year's Flintlock, one of fourteen major AFRICOM exercises scheduled for 2012, was canceled because of the coup in Mali.

In addition, over the past decade the Pentagon has maintained a multi-service (Army, Marine, Air Force and Navy) detachment of as many 3,000 service members, along with armored vehicles, aircraft and drones, at Camp Lemonnier in the Horn of Africa nation of Djibouti where AFRICOM's Combined Joint Task Force - Horn of Africa is based.

The U.S. military also has training centers and forward, logistics, drone and other bases and camps in Congo, Ethiopia, Mali, Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda and elsewhere.

Five years ago U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa launched the Africa Partnership Station program which in the interim has brought U.S. warships to every African coastal country except for those in North Africa (the province of the Naples, Italy-based U.S. Sixth Fleet), Ivory Coast (which since the "regime change" of last year is now a candidate for inclusion), Somalia (because of the ongoing armed conflict there), Eritrea (considered to be governed by a "rogue regime") and Madagascar (due to the last three years' political instability). Naval forces from Washington's North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies are integrated into the initiative.

This March the U.S. Air Forces Africa's complementary African Partnership Flight was inaugurated during an exercise in Ghana.

Last year the Obama administration announced an initial deployment of 100 special forces troops to Uganda, Congo, the Central African Republic and South Sudan for counterinsurgency operations against the Lord's Resistance Army. The number of troops and the range and nature of missions will undoubtedly widen in the future.

As the Pentagon's main expeditionary branch, the U.S. Marine Corps has been especially active in Africa in recent months.

Last month Associated Press reported that "drawing on lessons learned from Iraq and Afghanistan," U.S. Marines joined American military contractors at a remote base in Uganda to train local soldiers in combat skills, including house-to-house fighting, under the auspices of the State Department's Africa Contingency Operations Training and Assistance program (which "includes marksmanship, urban warfare and explosives handling") with a budget of \$3.8 million this year.

U.S.-based Military Professional Resources Inc. is under contract to run the program at the Ugandan base, which also includes the participation of British and French military personnel. According to the report, the private contractors "all are ex-military and most have had experience in either Iraq or Afghanistan."

The training is to prepare Ugandan troops for fighting in Somalia, where thousands of Ugandan and Burundian troops have been airlifted by NATO since 2010.

The Marines are assigned to the Special Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Force, which was established in October of last year, is based at the Naval Air Station Sigonella in Sicily and has been deployed to Uganda and Burundi for the Somali mission.

The commander of AFRICOM, General Carter Ham, was quoted in a Special Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Force press release as stating:

“One of our primary foci is support of African nations who are willing and able to provide forces to the African Union Mission in Somalia [AMISOM], and other peacekeeping operations. In support of the State Department’s Global Peace Operations Initiatives and the African Contingency Operations Training and Assistance programs, we provide military mentors to support pre-deployment training. We work extensively with the nations of Uganda and Burundi as they provide the majority of forces to AMISOM to date.”

The U.S. Marine Corps website reported that the unit’s African deployment — which “could become more commonplace as troop levels in Afghanistan drop in line with an approaching 2014 combat mission end date” – is part of a broader redeployment of Marines abroad:

“Already, a separate Marine Air Ground Task Force is planned for the Asia-Pacific region with troops basing in Darwin, Australia. The Black Sea Rotational Force first stood up in 2010 and is tasked with similar regional security partnership missions with southern and central European countries.”

Seventy-seven U.S. Marines are currently in Mozambique training troops from the host country as part of an Africa Partnership Station mission.

In April 1,200 U.S. Marines led the annual bilateral African Lion exercise in Morocco.

When AFRICOM achieved full operational capability on October 1, 2008 it became the first U.S. overseas regional military command established after the Cold War (since U.S. Central Command was created in 1983).

Washington, in its plan to achieve military presence throughout and superiority over the rest of the world, reserved Africa for last. Now its hour, too, has arrived.

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