

US military trains for urban warfare

David Walsh
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As part of its preparation for intervention around the globe, the US army is putting the finishing touches to its new Mounted Urban Combat Training Site at Fort Knox, Kentucky. The site, located on 26 acres, will include a mock town where tank units will learn “how to fight in the dangerously close confines of an urban center” (*New York Times*, August 22, 1999). Although its opening has been delayed by red tape and budgetary concerns, officials at Fort Knox assert the site will be open in October.

According to an article on the base's web site (“It Takes a Village To Prepare for Urban Combat ... And Fort Knox is Getting One,” by Robert S. Cameron), “Plans include specialized buildings for mounted soldiers to learn and practice basic tactical principles for any urban setting. Some structures will include working utilities, while others will represent rubble shells.” Following the principle of “training the way you fight,” planners created “a town filled with trash, debris, and abandoned, burnt-out vehicles. In addition, soldiers will encounter fire, smoke, and noise indoors and in the streets.”

Cameron notes that “Operations from Somalia to Bosnia show that the U.S. Army must operate in urban settings.... Future battlefields will include city streets. Europe and Asia now have the highest densities of urban population.... Data for Africa and Latin America shows rapid urbanization in these likely hot spots.” The author points to the difficulties of the Israeli army in dealing with the Palestinian *intifada* and the US military's problems in Somalia as proof “that failure to prepare for urban conditions carries a high human and political cost.”

The *Times* explains that several elite units, including the Army's Rangers, the Navy's Seals and the 101st Airborne Division are “eager to use” the \$15 million facility. The funds to get the site up and running will be forthcoming, according to the director of operations at

Fort Knox, “because there's too much interest in this.”

An article on “Operations in Urban Environments,” which appeared in the July-August 1998 *Military Review*, prepared by the US Army Command and General Staff College, asserts that while the US “will win” a conventional war or even several simultaneous ones, “as warfare becomes less conventional, raw military power may not be as decisive, as the results of guerrilla wars, prolonged wars, wars of attrition, terrorism, insurrection and revolution have shown. In addition, ‘pluralistic ambiguity’ of the American people may be cause for lack of support for urban interventions in other parts of the world that would otherwise be militarily feasible...”

The article points out that the growth of urban centers “throughout the world has been phenomenal.” It refers to Rio de Janeiro, Bombay, Shanghai, Seoul, Mexico City, Calcutta, San Paulo, Cairo and Jakarta, “all having more than 12 million people,” as only a few of the “cities where traditional governance and infrastructure seek, but often fail, to provide basic services for their inhabitants.” Aside from new births, growth in these urban areas “has generally resulted from an influx of the unemployed and often unemployable. Under these conditions, the demographics of growth may increasingly inhibit the ability of government to provide basic services.” Implicitly all these cities, and others, are potential targets for US military intervention under conditions of social breakdown.

“As training scenarios for urban settings are developed, it will be important to recall that cities are not monoliths but rather are complex collections of physical, geographical, social and economic conditions, each having different dynamics, characteristics and requirements relative to military-urban intervention, be it PK [peacekeeping] or warfare. While cities are increasingly becoming home to the masses, so also are

cultural, racial and economic differences becoming more polarized.”



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