

US government to set up new military command in Africa

Lawrence Porter**18 May 2007**

In an ominous development mirroring the explosive expansion of US militarism, the Bush administration has designated Africa as a continent of “strategic national concern,” and has initiated a new military policy to coincide with this new classification.

The Bush administration announced in February the formation of a new military command system in Africa, the United States African Command (AFRICOM), couched in the usual combination of humanitarian and anti-terrorist terminology.

Last month Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Defense Policy Ryan Henry was dispatched to a six-nation African tour to “clear up misunderstandings” about the Pentagon’s new military program. Several regimes raised concerns that the US was moving into the region because of the discovery of vast oil reserves in parts of the continent and the growing influence of China, seen as both an economic and political rival.

After Henry returned from meetings with officials from South Africa, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Ghana, Senegal and Kenya, he told the Washington media, “The goal is for AFRICOM not to be a US leadership role on the continent. We would be looking to complement rather than compete with any leadership efforts currently going on.”

He added that AFRICOM was not being set up in “response to Chinese presence” or to “secure resources,” such as oil. “While some of these may be part of the formula,” he acknowledged, the real reason is that Africa “is emerging on the world scene as a strategic ‘player,’ and we need to deal with it as a continent.”

To assure the African leaders, Henry said AFRICOM will not result in large-scale deployment of troops on the continent or a major increase in Pentagon spending there. However, to anyone familiar with diplomatic language, “strategic player” means that, in the view of the Bush administration, it is well worth waging wars in Africa in the defense of US interests.

West Africa, including Nigeria, presently supplies 12 percent of US crude oil imports. By 2015, it is estimated this

share will rise to 25 percent, a greater proportion than Saudi Arabia.

China is the second largest importer of oil after the US, to fuel its rapid economic expansion. According to China’s General Administration of Customs, the Asian nation imported nearly 11 percent more oil during the first four months of 2007 than during the same period in 2006, with the bulk of the increase coming from Africa. In 2006 China consumed 320 million tons of crude oil, with 7 percent of its imports coming from the Sudan.

China imports 25 percent of its crude oil from Africa and is looking for ways to increase the supply from the continent. Since 2000 there has been a five-fold increase in trade between China and Africa—now totaling \$5.5 billion a year—and China is now the continent’s third largest trading partner, following the US and France and eclipsing Great Britain.

Sub-Saharan Africa includes eight oil-producing countries: Nigeria, Angola, Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Cameron, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan.

Nigeria is the largest producer of oil in Africa and has the 11th largest reserves in the world. It is presently producing 2.45 million barrels a day, 42 percent of which goes to the US. The three largest oil companies in the country include two US firms, ExxonMobil and Chevron, and the British-Dutch Shell.

Angola is the second-largest African oil producer and is expected to reach 2 million barrels a day by 2008.

Sudan is also rich in oil, and China has more influence there than any other country. China controls 40 percent of Sudan’s oil although Chevron spent \$1.2 billion there and discovered oilfields in the south and at one point estimated that Sudan might prove to have more oil than Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Mandy Turner of the *Guardian* characterized both the US and China as key players in a new “scramble for Africa.” “The new entrant to the scramble is China,” she wrote. “Africa offers the natural resources vital to fuel its rapidly

growing economy,” including copper and cobalt from the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zambia, iron ore and platinum from South Africa, and to Cameroon, Gabon and the Republic of the Congo for timber. For oil, it has been striking deals with Nigeria, Angola, Sudan and Equatorial Guinea.”

With the end of the Cold War, when the major concern of the US was the struggle against the Soviet Union, requiring alliances with nominally independent Third World regimes, after 1991 the US felt able to pursue a more openly colonial-style policy of hegemonic control through the use of the military. The 9/11 terrorist attacks have served as a useful pretext for this shift in US operations in Africa.

Despite the pretense that fighting terrorists and preventing humanitarian disasters will be the main purpose of US military operations in Africa, a report published by the National Intelligence Council, which bills itself as the US intelligence Community’s center for mid-term and long-term strategy thinking, makes it clear that US aims in the region are geopolitical in nature, with control of oil resources a primary concern.

Entitled “External Relations and Africa,” the report says, “Military engagement has shifted from direct support of proxy regimes or movements during the Cold War,” (as when the Belgium government, with the help of the CIA, overthrew and murdered Congolese prime minister Patrice Lumumba), “to a combination of capacity-building and, especially post-9/11, direct American military involvement in basing areas such as Djibouti.”

In the section, “Future Trends in External Engagement with Africa,” one of the prime reasons given for direct military engagement is “the increasing importance of the oil sector in especially but not exclusively US policy calculations on Africa.”

“Importantly,” the report continues, “most of Africa’s oil producers are not OPEC members—notably Angola, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Congo-Brazzaville and Cameroon.”

An ominous warning of future US military operations in Africa came last month when Ethiopian troops, backed by the US, carried out a bloodbath in Somalia, leveling large parts of the most impoverished neighborhoods in the capital city, Mogadishu. (See “Massacre in Mogadishu—war crime made in the USA”) Over a thousand people have died since US war planes bombed towns in southern Somalia and 350,000 to half a million people have fled the city, living in camps.

While officially there are no American troops involved in this conflict, CIA personnel and military special forces have been involved in the training of Ethiopian troops. One of the first objectives of the Ethiopian forces was to reoccupy the American embassy. (See “Ethiopian troops occupy

Mogadishu”)

Somalia is just one strategic flashpoint. J. Peter Pham, director of the Nelson Institute for International and Public Affairs at James Madison University and an advocate of US domination of Africa, commented in an editorial in the *National Interest online* that the decision of the Bush administration to establish the command center “represents the administration’s single most purposeful step towards assigning Africa its due priority.” (See “The Africa Command Rises—Finally”)

“The move,” states Pham, could represent “a significant long-term engagement” that would “anchor the continent firmly in America’s orbit” (emphasis added). He went on to cite the 2002 National Security Strategy document where the Bush administration stated it has the right to carry out preemptive strikes against any country to defend its interests, “Africa,” states the report, “holds growing geo-strategic importance and is a high priority of this Administration.”

Presently the US controls three regional commands in Africa, which share responsibility for US interests in the continent. The largest area is controlled by the European Command, which oversees North Africa, West Africa including the Gulf of Guinea, and central and southern Africa. The Central Command is responsible for the Horn of Africa—countries such as Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Djibouti, Sudan and Egypt. The Pacific Command includes Madagascar, the Seychelles islands and the Indian Ocean area off the African coast.

AFRICOM will initially operate out of the Stuttgart, Germany-based European Command center before it moves to a permanent base in Africa. The US has been careful not to spell out its plans, stating only that it will deal with peacekeeping, humanitarian aid missions, military training and support of African partner countries.

The US has claimed that it does not plan to engage large numbers of troops in the region, similar to its operations in Iraq. However, the presence of US troops will further the militarization of the continent with the possibility that another conflagration could develop over resources, like that in Iraq, with wider and more ominous implications.



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