



U.S. To Establish New U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM)

Theresa Whelan, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for African Affairs; Rear Admiral Robert Moeller, Special Assistant to the Commander, U.S. Central Command; and Ambassador Robert Loftis, Senior Advisor in the Bureau of Political and Military Affairs, Department of State

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MODERATOR: Good afternoon and welcome to the Foreign Press Center here in Washington. We're delighted today to have a briefing on the newly established U.S. Africa Command, AFRICOM. We have with us three people. Two will speak and then the third will be here for question and answer.

The first is Ms. Whelan, who is the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (DASD) for African Affairs, followed by Rear Admiral Robert Moeller, who is the Special Assistant to the Commander of the U.S. CENTCOM. And finally we have Ambassador Robert Loftis, who is the Senior Advisor in the Bureau of Political and Military Affairs, Department of State.

We only have a little less than half an hour because we have some one-on-one interviews afterwards, so I'm going to keep it very short. I ask you to keep your questions, during the question-and-answer, down to one question each to start with. Turn off your cell phones and Madame Assistant Secretary, please...



MS. WHELAN: Thank you. Good afternoon. I will try and be brief so that we can leave plenty of time for Q&A, given the short time that we have. Next slide.

This slide just depicts the direction that we received from the President of the United States to establish a command, a unified combatant command for Africa. We -- you'll see on the left-hand side of the slide the statement that President Bush made when he announced that the United States would be establishing this new command. The purpose of the command, as you say, is to enhance our efforts to bring peace and security to the people of Africa and to promote the common goals of development of health, education, democracy, and economic growth. Next slide.

The importance of Africa is the reason that we are establishing this new unified command. We recognize your -- that Africa is of significant strategic importance to the United States; the size of its population, its natural resource wealth, its potential, its -- the importance of Africa in the context of global security are all reasons that we believe that it is important now for the Department of Defense to focus its efforts in Africa a little bit more efficiently. You can see, below the second bullet, our main objectives in terms of reducing conflict, improving security, defeating terrorists, and then supporting crisis response. Next slide.

This is the concept that we have developed for the Africa Command. The primary -- our primary objective is, in addition to making the U.S. Department of Defense organizational structure more efficient and effective by having one command focused on Africa as opposed to having three separate commands focused on separate pieces of Africa, we also want to try to integrate better with our counterparts in the U.S. Government, such as the State Department, which is one of the reasons that we have Ambassador Loftis from the State Department joining us here. And Ambassador Loftis and a number of State Department and USAID personnel have been quite instrumental in helping us think through some of the initial ideas that formed the underpinning of our AFRICOM structure.

We -- as I said, we will consolidate on the Defense side three combatant commands, their responsibilities into one. Currently, European Command, Pacific Command, and Central Command all have responsibilities for some portion of Africa, so we will now take Africa and make that the responsibility of one command, AFRICOM. And as I noted a minute ago, we want to ensure that this command pulls together the other elements of the U.S. Government that are involved in working in Africa. Next slide.

At this point, I am going to turn it over to my colleague, Rear Admiral Moeller, who will talk to you a little bit about the command structure and mission.

RADM MOELLER: Thank you very much and good afternoon. It's good to be with you all. On the left-hand side, you see, essentially, the way we approach, from a Defense standpoint, Africa today, with -- as Ms. Whelan indicated. Three geographic combatant commands have responsibilities for portions of the continent with European Command having the largest number of countries with whom they work.

When we get to a full operational capability in the process of standing up the command, AFRICOM will be responsible for the entire continent, less Egypt. It's -- where we are right now is that we anticipate that Egypt will continue to have the relationship that it does today with U.S. Central Command, but we will probably -- and we look forward to consultations with the Egyptians about also having a relationship which we will need to define with AFRICOM. Slide, please.

These are the kinds of things, again, from -- then from -- if you go back to some of the items that Ms. Whelan spoke to, then these are the kinds of tasks that this command will be focused on. Now a lot of these things -- virtually all these kinds of things are ongoing today, but by the process and by the virtue of consolidating three commands into one solely focused on the continent, we think that we will be able to do all of these kinds of activities even more effectively than we're able to do them today and bring more capacity, as I said, more focus to these kinds of activities with -- certainly with building partnership capacity with our African partners at the top of the list. Slide, please.

If we take that list, then, of the kinds of things that we're going to do, we've come up with this -- currently, this draft mission statement. All geographic combatant commands have mission statements that kind of direct their activities, broadly speaking, and also for subordinates so everyone is focused on and has a clear understanding of what the major responsibilities are. This is, as it says here, a draft. We will be continuing to work on this over the next several months to really refine this as we prepare to stand up the command. Slide, please.

And the newer things that we're working on here, we are in process -- again, we've done several months of planning. The next thing that we're getting ready to do is, the transition team is taking place and will be assembling in the initial headquarters location, but ultimately, in one of our major tasks, the transition team, which will become the core of the command headquarters staff, will be the process of determining and, through our consultation process with our key African partners, where it -- we hope that it will be feasible to establish the headquarters on the continent. That is our goal to do that and we've got a lot of work to do to think our way through that here over the next several months. Slide, please.

And so again, as Ms. Whelan indicated, the growing, ever-growing strategic importance of the continent is one of the main drivers of why we are now standing up this command. As Ms. Whelan also indicated, we are looking to have very, very much an interagency U.S. Government, interagency-focused command headquarters and we've got a lot of work to do on that piece. And as I indicated, building partner capacity with all of our African partners is something that is high at the top of our list that we will be working on and developing those plans to do those kinds of things over the next many months.

Thank you very much.

MODERATOR: We'll take questions now.

QUESTION: Mr. Abderrahim Foukara, Al Jazeera, Qatar: How have you coordinated with other European nations; is this a 21st Century scramble for Africa?

MS. WHELAN: I think the answer to your second question first is no, this isn't about a scramble for the continent. I think this is about the United States recognizing that the continent is important in the context of the 21st century, both politically, economically and in the context of security, and that we need to focus our attention on it in a much more efficient way, at least on the Department of Defense side, than we have done in the past. Dividing the responsibilities among three commands is probably not the most effective organizational structure in which to focus on the continent. So this is partly about organizational effectiveness for us.

As far as consultation with Europeans, we have done some consultation, especially with the Germans, because we're going to be temporarily locating the headquarters in Germany. We have also talked a bit with the French and we also plan to talk more with our European allies, including the British, the French, those that are very active in Africa.

We actually have a regular ongoing dialogue with them about security activities and cooperation in Africa. So we are in sort of constant contact with them on various and sundry issues that develop across the continent, and our discussions about AFRICOM will flow into that ongoing dialogue.

MODERATOR: We'll take a question from New York now. Go ahead, New York. Your audio is off. New York, we'll come back to you when you get your audio working. Sorry we cannot hear you.

QUESTION: Thank you. This question is for any of you...

MODERATOR: Please state your name and publication.

QUESTION: Yeah, I'm sorry. Mike Kellerman, with ATN Television, Denmark. Recently we saw off Somalia the use of U.S. military force to take out Islamists who, in effect, chased them into the sea in conjunction with the Ethiopians, if you recall. Is this an expansion of the U.S. military presence in Africa and do you intend doing basically the same thing, looking for Islamists or al-Qaida or whomever might be trying to hide in Africa? Is that what the military is going to be used for?

MS. WHELAN: That isn't the purpose of this command in any way, shape or form. The purpose of this command, as we stated, was to help promote greater security cooperation and dialogue between ourselves and our African partners. And that is the intent, to help build capacity within Africa for security because security is sort of the framework, if you will, or the foundation of the stability which is required for economic development, social development, et cetera. So this isn't about chasing terrorists around Africa. Obviously, within the context of security we will -- the issue of terrorism arises, but it is in the broader context of security. That is not the specific purpose of this command.

Do either of you gentlemen want to add to this?

RADM MOELLER: I would just simply say again the kinds of activities that we've got going on by virtue of consolidating three commands and establishing the one command will allow us to do the partner building capacity piece much more effectively than we're able to do that today.

QUESTION: If I could have one quick follow-up -- Will this include training, for example, African military might be looking for the US to counter instability?

RADM MOELLER: Well, in the largest context of building partner capacity, again, this will be about helping our partners develop the capabilities to help themselves. And so should they need to do some of those kinds of things, they would have the capabilities to do that.

MODERATOR: New York, try again?

QUESTION: Mr. Laolu Akande, The Guardian, Nigeria: Where will the AFRICOM Headquarters be situated? What role will Nigeria play in AFRICOM?

MS. WHELAN: Yes. Sorry. Our intention is to locate the command in Africa and but we do not have a specific location identified at present. That is one of the issues to be determined and it will be determined in consultation with our African partners.

I believe there was also a question with regard to what role would Nigeria play. We certainly hope that we will be able to spend a considerable amount of time consulting with the Nigerian senior political and military leadership on their thoughts about this command and how it can be helpful in West Africa and in Africa more broadly in terms of promoting and building security capacity.

QUESTION: Hi, Eric Niiler with Marketplace, Public Radio International. Could you tell me a little bit about the oil and other natural resources in Africa and how AFRICOM will be used to protect those resources?

MS. WHELAN: AFRICOM isn't going to be used to protect natural resources in Africa. To the extent that AFRICOM through its interaction with other African countries and through whatever help we can provide in terms of their developing their capacities to promote security in their own country and in the region, if they will be able to protect their natural resources more effectively, then that will be a good thing. But AFRICOM will not be in the business of protecting natural resources.

QUESTION: Thank you. I'm Ellis Togba from The Analyst of Liberia. The United States has been -- is having military cooperation with Africa, but now you are talking about an establishment of AFRICOM. Now, that comes at a time China is stepping up development with Africa. Would that be the reason, sir?

AMBASSADOR LOFTIS: No, I mean, the discussion about creating an African command has been around for a number of years. Oh, sorry. Pardon me. The idea of creating an African command has been around for a number of years. And as my colleagues have said, this is really about how we more effectively organize our security cooperation and defense cooperation with African countries. It's not designed against any particular country. It's a way for us to better do the types of things and support the other activities of the United States Government that are already taking place in Africa.

QUESTION: Christine Xie from Phoenix TV of Hong Kong. I have two questions for Secretary Whelan and Admiral Moeller. The first one is would AFRICOM be working with Chinese People's Liberation Army? And the second question was what would be the impact of AFRICOM on U.S.-China relationship?

MS. WHELAN: Well, I think it's sort of too early to speculate on who AFRICOM is going to work with outside of Africa. We're still obviously developing AFRICOM and refining what it's going to look like, what it's going to do. And that's why we're going to be in a very intensive consultation process over the next -- the coming months about AFRICOM with our allies and with the African partner states. So I think I need to probably defer an answer to that question until the future.

And then -- no, I think with regard to just the broader relationship, I would just echo what Ambassador Loftis said, that -- you know, the command is being created to more efficiently focus U.S. military efforts in Africa and that we hope that the U.S. relationship with China will actually be positively impacted by this, not negatively impacted.

QUESTION: All right, I'm Horatio Bobby Willie, Star Radio, from Liberia. Will the establishment of this U.S. AFRICOM put an end to the continuing and constant conflict around Africa? And my second question is, you want to determine a country in Africa that will serve as the command center; will there be standards set to determine which country qualifies to host the headquarters? Because I know almost every African country will want it.

MS. WHELAN: Gee, that's nice to know you might be wanted. I'll let ADM Moeller answer the second question. I'll answer the first. It would be nice if I could -- if we could say, "Oh yes, the creation of AFRICOM will -- all of a sudden, there will be peace and stability throughout the African continent," but obviously, this is the real world and there will always be troubles.

But we actually like to think of AFRICOM as a new kind of fire department. Normally, you have the fire department, they stay in their firehouse and they spend time polishing their shiny fire truck. And when a fire breaks out, then they rush to the fire and they try to put the fire out. And then when they're done, they go back to their fire house and they go back to polishing their truck and waiting for the next fire.

However, we want AFRICOM to be a command that essentially goes out and helps to develop, along with our African partners, fire safety techniques, advises on putting in sprinkler systems in order to reduce damage from fire and do preventative things so that hopefully, fires won't break out. But because accidents happen and you can't control everything in life, if a fire does break out, the fire will not be as severe and it might be put out a little bit more easily and maybe it might not impact as many people. So I think that would be the way that we would look at it. And then let me let ADM Moeller answer the second question.

RADM MOELLER: With regard to the command location, we have and we anticipate beginning soon within a matter of weeks, most likely, a series of detailed conversations with countries around the continent to kind of get their perspective on this idea of a headquarters location on the continent. And that will unfold over a period of several weeks, probably a number of series of consultations. We will go through a fairly extensive analytical process to look at all the issues that we have to consider in that deliberative process and at some point then, I would anticipate probably later this year, have a much better perspective on where, in fact, it may be feasible to locate the headquarters.

QUESTION: We have -- how big is this command going to be? How many troops, ships, etc.?

RADM MOELLER: All those kinds of operational details are the work of the transition team here over the next several months to really determine based on, again, what we need in terms of staff capacity to be able to plan for and work with our partners on doing those kinds of tasks that we showed up here before.

MODERATOR: Thank you.



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