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The US's Invasion of Africa That Nobody Knows About

By John Glaser

April 15, 2014

U.S. Army Spc. Tyler Meehan observes Kenyan trainees

The U.S. is assembling the rudiments of imperial infrastructure throughout Africa, and hardly anybody knows about it. Hardly anybody knows about it because the government and military refuse to divulge much of U.S. foreign policy towards Africa. You see, U.S. foreign policy is really none of our business.

The Obama administration has been slowly – and *very* quietly – peppering the U.S. military throughout the continent and putting hundreds of millions of dollars into the pockets of government contractors to build the necessary infrastructure for a permanent U.S. military presence.

Washington has been increasing its support for African regimes, many with records of human rights violations ^[1], and boosting efforts to train African militaries to keep them dependent on the Pentagon. The U.S. is training and equipping militaries in countries including Algeria, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and Tunisia – not to mention operations in Libya, Somalia, Uganda, Kenya, Djibouti, et al.

Reporter Nick Turse has been at the forefront of reporting on America's gradual infiltration of Africa. He writes ^[2] this week about, among other things, the difference between what military officials say about Africa policy when asked by reporters and what they tell U.S. contractors looking to do business for taxpayer money. To journalists, the Pentagon maintains that we're hardly doing anything in Africa beyond "humanitarian assistance." To the military industrial complex, they say America is "at war" in Africa and is looking for a "permanent footprint" throughout the continent.

Captain Rick Cook, the chief of US Africa Command's Engineer Division, was addressing an audience of more than fifty representatives of some of the largest military engineering firms on the planet—and this reporter. The contractors were interested in jobs and he wasn't pulling any punches. "The eighteen months or so that I've been here, we've been at war the whole time," Cook told them. "We are trying to provide opportunities for the African people to fix their own African challenges. Now, unfortunately, operations in Libya, South Sudan, and Mali, over the last two years, have proven there's always something going on in Africa."

Cook was one of three US military construction officials who, earlier this month, spoke candidly about the Pentagon's efforts in Africa to men and women from URS Corporation, AECOM, CH2M Hill and other top firms. During a paid-access web seminar, the three of them insisted that they were seeking industry "partners" because the military has "big plans" for the continent. They foretold a future marked by expansion, including the building up of a "permanent footprint" in Djibouti for the next decade or more, a possible new compound in Niger, and a string of bases devoted to surveillance activities spreading across the northern tier of Africa. They even let slip mention of a small, previously unacknowledged US compound in Mali.

Turse sums up some of the activities the U.S. is known to be engaged in: "Over the last several years, the US has been building a constellation ^[3] of drone bases across Africa, flying ^[4] intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance missions out of not only Niger, but also Djibouti, Ethiopia, and the island nation of the Seychelles."

[The US military] now averages far more than a mission a day ^[5] on the continent, conducting operations ^[6] with almost every African military force, in almost every African country ^[5] while building or building up camps, compounds, and "contingency security locations ^[6]." The US has taken an active role in wars from Libya ^[7] to the Central African Republic ^[8], sent special ops forces into countries from Somalia ^[9] to South Sudan ^[10], conducted airstrikes ^[11] and abduction missions ^[12], even put boots on the ground in countries where it pledged ^[13] it would not.

Meanwhile, CNN is preoccupied with its 500th hour straight of the missing Malaysian airline coverage. Fox is busy with its perennial Benghazi conspiracy theories and antagonistic coverage of Russian policy in Ukraine. And MSNBC doesn't dare cover anything but Obama's benevolent domestic social policies. In the newspapers, one can find the occasional report of U.S. missions in Africa, but they hardly question the wisdom or legitimacy of such interventions (and hardly anyone reads the newspapers anyhow).

Mix this deficient news media environment with the Pentagon's utter refusal to answer straight questions about U.S. interventionism in Africa, and you have a public that is completely uninformed about a growing chunk of U.S. foreign policy that will soon (as it already has ^[14]) render dangerous unintended consequences.

[1] many with records of human rights violations: <http://antiwar.com/blog/2013/10/21/us-increasingly-supporting-government-repression-in-africa/>

[2] writes: <http://www.thenation.com/article/179324/us-military-has-been-war-africa-sly-years#>

[3] constellation: http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/drone-base-in-niger-gives-us-a-strategic-foothold-in-west-africa/2013/03/21/700ee8d0-9170-11e2-9c4d-798c073d7ec8_story.html

[4] flying: <http://www.airforcetimes.com/article/20140402/NEWS04/304020047>

[5] mission a day:

http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/175823/tomgram%20percent3A_nick_turse,_america%20percent27s_n-on-stop_ops_in_africa/

[6] operations:

http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/175743/tomgram%20percent3A_nick_turse%20percent2C_africom%20percent27s_gigantic_%20percent22small_footprint%20percent22

[7] Libya: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/08/30/america-s-secret-libya-war-u-s-spent-1-billion-on-covert-ops-helping-nato.html>

[8] Central African Republic:

http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/175818/tomgram%20percent3A_nick_turse%20percent2C_american_proxy_wars_in_africa

[9] Somalia: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/06/us-special-forces-libya-somalia>

[10] South Sudan: <http://www.navytimes.com/article/20131227/NEWS/312270010/3-SEALs-wounded-South-Sudan-back-U-S->

[11] airstrikes: <http://www.cnn.com/2014/01/26/world/africa/somalia-us-airstrike/>

[12] abduction missions: http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/video-shows-us-abduction-of-accused-al-qaeda-terrorist-on-trial-for-embassy-bombings/2014/02/10/7f84927a-8f6b-11e3-b46a-5a3d0d2130da_story.html

[13] pledged: http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/pentagon-deploys-small-number-of-troops-to-war-torn-mali/2013/04/30/2b02c928-b1a0-11e2-bc39-65b0a67147df_story.html

[14] already has: <http://fff.org/explore-freedom/article/u-s-government-to-blame-for-somalias-misery/>