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Why Is the US Military So Interested in Chad?

The US military continues a long series of mistakes, missteps and mishaps across Africa.

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November 20, 2014

Admit it. You don't know where Chad is. You know it's in Africa, of course. But beyond that? Maybe with a map of the continent and by some process of elimination you could come close. But you'd probably pick Sudan or maybe the Central African Republic. Here's a tip. In the future, choose that vast, arid swath of land just below Libya.

Who does know where Chad is? That answer is simpler: the US military. Recent contracting documents indicate that it's building something there. Not a huge facility, not a mini-American town, but a small camp.

That the US military is expanding its efforts in Africa shouldn't be a shock anymore. For years now, the Pentagon has been increasing its missions there and promoting a mini-basing boom that has left it with a growing collection of outposts sprouting across the northern tier of the continent. This string of camps is meant to do what more than a decade of counterterrorism efforts, including the training and equipping of local military forces and a variety of humanitarian hearts-and-minds missions, has failed to accomplish: transform the Trans-Sahara region in the northern and western parts of the continent into a bulwark of stability.

That the United States is doing more in Chad specifically isn't particularly astonishing either. Earlier this year, TomDispatch and The Washington Post both reported on separate recent

deployments of US troops to that north-central African nation. Nor is it shocking that the new American compound is to be located near the capital, N'Djamena. The United States has previously employed N'Djamena as a hub for its air operations. What's striking is the terminology used in the official documents. After years of adamant claims that the US military has just one lonely base in all of Africa—Camp Lemonnier in the tiny Horn of Africa nation of Djibouti—Army documents state that it will now have “base camp facilities” in Chad.

US Africa Command (AFRICOM) still insists that there is no Chadian base, that the camp serves only as temporary lodgings to support a Special Operations training exercise to be held next year. It also refused to comment about another troop deployment to Chad uncovered by TomDispatch. When it comes to American military activities in Africa, much remains murky.

Nonetheless, one fact is crystal clear: the United States is ever more tied to Chad. This remains true despite a decade-long effort to train its military forces only to see them bolt from one mission in the face of casualties, leave another in a huff after gunning down unarmed civilians, and engage in human rights abuses at home with utter impunity. All of this suggests yet another potential source of blowback from America's efforts in Africa which have backfired, gone bust, and sown strife from Libya to South Sudan, the Gulf Guinea to Mali and beyond.

A Checkered History With Chad

Following 9/11, the United States launched a counterterrorism program, known as the Pan-Sahel Initiative, to bolster the militaries of Mali, Niger, Mauritania and Chad. Three years later, in 2005, the program expanded to include Nigeria, Senegal, Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia and was renamed the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP). The idea was to turn a huge swath of Africa into a terror-resistant bulwark of stability. Twelve years and hundreds of millions of dollars later, the region is anything but stable, which means that it fits perfectly, like a missing puzzle piece, with the rest of the under-the-radar US “pivot” to that continent.

Coups by the US-backed militaries of Mauritania in 2005 and again in 2008, Niger in 2010 and Mali in 2012, as well as a 2011 revolution that overthrew Tunisia's US-backed government (after the US-supported army stood aside); the establishment of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in 2006; and the rise of Boko Haram from an obscure radical sect to a raging insurgent movement in northern Nigeria are only some of the most notable recent failures in TSCTP nations. Chad came close to making the list, too, but attempted military coups in 2006 and 2013 were thwarted, and in 2008, the government, which had itself come to power in a 1990 coup, managed to hold off against a rebel assault on the capital.

Through it all, the United States has continued to mentor Chad's military, and in return, that nation has lent its muscle to support Washington's interests in the region. Chad, for instance, joined the 2013 US-backed French military intervention to retake Mali after Islamists began routing the forces of the American-trained officer who had launched a coup that overthrew that country's democratically elected government. According to military briefing slides obtained by TomDispatch, an Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) liaison team was deployed to Chad to aid operations in Mali and the United States also conducted pre-deployment training for its Chadian proxies. After initial success, the French effort became bogged down and has now become a seemingly interminable, smoldering counterinsurgency campaign. Chad, for its

part, quickly withdrew its forces from the fight after sustaining modest casualties. “Chad’s army has no ability to face the kind of guerrilla fighting that is emerging in northern Mali. Our soldiers are going to return to Chad,” said that country’s president, Idriss Deby.

Still, US support continued.

In September of 2013, the US military organized meetings with Chad’s senior-most military leaders, including Army chief General Brahim Seid Mahamat, Minister of Defense General Bénéaïdo Tatola and counterterror tsar Brigadier General Abderaman Youssouf Merry, to build solid relationships and support efforts at “countering violent extremist operations objectives and theater security cooperation programs.” This comes from a separate set of documents concerning “IO,” or Information Operations, obtained from the military through the Freedom of Information Act. French officials also attended these meetings, and the agenda included the former colonial power’s support of “security cooperation with Chad in the areas of basic and officer training and staff procedures,” as well as “French support [for] US security cooperation efforts with the Chadian military.” Official briefing slides also mention ongoing “train and equip” activities with Chadian troops.

All of this followed on the heels of a murky coup plot by elements of the armed forces last May to which the Chadian military reacted with a crescendo of violence. According to a State Department report, Chad’s “security forces shot and killed unarmed civilians and arrested and detained members of parliament, military officers, former rebels, and others.”

After Chad reportedly helped overthrow the Central African Republic’s president in early 2013 and later aided in the 2014 ouster of the rebel leader who deposed him, it sent its forces into that civil war–torn land as part of an African Union mission bolstered by US-backed French troops. Soon, Chad’s peacekeeping forces were accused of stoking sectarian strife by supporting Muslim militias against Christian fighters. Then, on March 29, a Chadian military convoy arrived in a crowded marketplace in the capital, Bangui. There, according to a United Nations report, the troops “reportedly opened fire on the population without any provocation. At the time, the market was full of people, including many girls and women buying and selling produce. As panic-stricken people fled in all directions, the soldiers allegedly continued firing indiscriminately.”

In all, thirty civilians were reportedly killed and more than 300 were wounded. Amid criticism, Chad angrily announced it was withdrawing its troops. “Despite the sacrifices we have made, Chad and Chadians have been targeted in a gratuitous and malicious campaign that blamed them for all the suffering” in the Central African Republic, declared Chad’s foreign ministry.

In May, despite this, the United States sent eighty military personnel to Chad to operate drones and conduct surveillance in an effort to locate hundreds of schoolgirls kidnapped by Boko Haram in neighboring Nigeria. “These personnel will support the operation of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance aircraft for missions over northern Nigeria and the surrounding area,” President Obama told Congress. The force, he said, will remain in Chad “until its support in resolving the kidnapping situation is no longer required.”

In July, AFRICOM admitted that it had reduced surveillance flights searching for the girls to focus on other missions. Now AFRICOM tells TomDispatch that, while “the United States

continues to help Nigeria address the threat posed by Boko Haram, the previously announced ISR support deployment to Chad has departed.” Yet more than seven months after their abduction, the girls still have not been located, let alone rescued.

In June, according to the State Department, the deputy commander of US Army Africa (USARAF), Brigadier General Kenneth H. Moore Jr., visited Chad to “celebrat[e] the successful conclusion of a partnership between USARAF and the Chadian Armed Forces.” Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus arrived in that landlocked country at the same time to meet with “top Chadian officials.” His visit, according to an embassy press release, “underscore[d] the importance of bilateral relations between the two countries, as well as military cooperation.” And that cooperation has been ample.

Earlier this year, Chadian troops joined those of the United States, Burkina Faso, Canada, France, Mauritania, the Netherlands, Nigeria, Senegal, the United Kingdom and host nation Niger for three weeks of military drills as part of Flintlock 2014, an annual Special Ops counterterrorism exercise for TSCTP nations. At about the time Flintlock was concluding, soldiers from Chad, Cameroon, Burundi, Gabon, Nigeria, the Republic of Congo, the Netherlands and the United States took part in another annual training exercise, Central Accord 2014. The Army also sent medical personnel to mentor Chadian counterparts in “tactical combat casualty care,” while Marines and Navy personnel traveled to Chad to train that country’s militarized anti-poaching park rangers in small-unit tactics and patrolling.

A separate contingent of Marines conducted military intelligence training with Chadian officers and non-commissioned officers. The scenario for the final exercise, also involving personnel from Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Mauritania, Senegal and Tunisia, had a ripped-from-the-headlines quality: “preparing for an unconventional war against an insurgent threat in Mali.”

As for US Army Africa, it sent trainers as part of a separate effort to provide Chadian troops with instruction on patrolling and fixed-site defense as well as live-fire training. “We are ready to begin training in Chad for about 1,300 soldiers—an 850 man battalion, plus another 450 man battalion,” said Colonel John Ruffing, the Security Cooperation director of US Army Africa, noting that the United States was working in tandem with a French private security firm.

In September, AFRICOM reaffirmed its close ties with Chad by renewing an Acquisition Cross Servicing Agreement, which allows both militaries to purchase from each other or trade for basic supplies. The open-ended pact, said Brigadier General James Vechery, AFRICOM’s director for logistics, “will continue to strengthen our bilateral cooperation on international security issues...as well as the interoperability of the armed forces of both nations.”

The Base That Wasn’t and the Deployment That Might Be

In the months since the Chadian armed forces’ massacre in Bangui, various US military contract solicitations and related documents have pointed toward an even more substantive American presence in Chad. In late September, the Army put out a call for bids to sustain American personnel for six months at those “base camp facilities” located near N’Djamena. Supporting documents specifically mention thirty-five US personnel and detail the services necessary to run an austere outpost: field sanitation, bulk water supply, sewage services and trash removal. The

materials indicate that “local security policy and procedures” are to be provided by the Chadian armed forces and allude to the use of more than one location, saying “none of the sites in Chad are considered U.S.-federally controlled facilities.” The documents state that such support for those facilities is to run until July 2015.

After AFRICOM failed to respond to repeated email requests for further information, I called up Chief of Media Operations Benjamin Benson and asked about the base camp. He was even more tight-lipped than usual. “I personally don’t know anything,” he told me. “That’s not saying AFRICOM doesn’t have any information on that.”

In follow-up emails, Benson eventually told me that the “base camp” is strictly a temporary facility to be used by US forces only for the duration of the upcoming Flintlock 2015 exercise. He stated in no uncertain terms: “We are not establishing a base/forward presence/contingency location, building a US facility, or stationing troops in Chad.”

Benson would not, however, let me speak with an expert on US military activities in Chad. Nor would he confirm or deny the continued presence of the Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance liaison team deployed to Chad in 2013 to support the French mission in Mali, first reported on by *TomDispatch* this March. “[W]e cannot discuss ISR activities or the locations and durations of operational deployments,” he wrote. If an ISR team is still present in Chad, this would represent a substantive long-term deployment despite the lack of a formal US base.

The N’Djamena “base camp” is just one of a series of Chadian projects mentioned in recent contracting documents. An Army solicitation from September sought “building materials for use in Chad,” while supporting documents specifically mention an “operations center/multi-use facility.” That same month, the Army awarded a contract for the transport of equipment from Niamey, Niger, the home of another of the growing network of US outposts in Africa, to N’Djamena. The Army also began seeking out contractors capable of supplying close to 600 bunk beds that could support an American-sized weight of 200 to 225 pounds for a facility “in and around the N’Djamena region.” And just last month, the military put out a call for a contractor to supply construction equipment—a bulldozer, dump truck, excavator and the like—for a project in, you guessed it, N’Djamena.

This increased US interest in Chad follows on the heels of a push by France, the nation’s former colonial overlord and America’s current premier proxy in Africa, to beef up its military footprint on the continent. In July, following US-backed French military interventions in Mali and the Central African Republic, French President François Hollande announced a new mission, Operation Barkhane (a term for a crescent-shaped sand dune found in the Sahara). Its purpose: a long-term counterterrorism operation involving 3,000 French troops deployed to a special forces outpost in Burkina Faso and forward operating bases in Mali, Niger and, not surprisingly, Chad.

“There are plenty of threats in all directions,” Hollande told French soldiers in Chad, citing militants in Mali and Libya as well as Boko Haram in Nigeria. “Rather than having large bases that are difficult to manage in moments of crisis, we prefer installations that can be used quickly and efficiently.” Shortly afterward, President Obama approved millions in emergency military aid for French operations in Mali, Niger and Chad, while the United Kingdom, another former colonial power in the region, dispatched combat aircraft to the French base in N’Djamena to contribute to the battle against Boko Haram.

From Setback to Blowback?

In recent years, the US military has been involved in a continual process of expanding its presence in Africa. Out of public earshot, officials have talked about setting up a string of small bases across the northern tier of the continent. Indeed, over the last years, US staging areas, mini-bases and outposts have popped up in the contiguous nations of Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and, skipping Chad, in the Central African Republic, followed by South Sudan, Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia and Djibouti. A staunch American ally with a frequent and perhaps enduring American troop presence, Chad seems like the natural spot for still another military compound—the only missing link in a long chain of countries stretching from west to east, from one edge of the continent to the other—even if AFRICOM continues to insist that there’s no American “base” in the works.

Even without a base, the United States has for more than a decade poured copious amounts of money, time and effort into making Chad a stable regional counterterrorism partner, sending troops there, training and equipping its army, counseling its military leaders, providing tens of millions of dollars in aid, funding its military expeditions, supplying its army with equipment ranging from tents to trucks, donating additional equipment for its domestic security forces, providing a surveillance and security system for its border security agents and looking the other way when its military employed child soldiers.

The results? A flight from the fight in Mali, a massacre in the Central African Republic, hundreds of schoolgirls still in the clutches of Boko Haram, and a US alliance with a regime whose “most significant human rights problems,” according to the most recent country report by the State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, “were security force abuse, including torture; harsh prison conditions; and discrimination and violence against women and children,” not to mention the restriction of freedom of speech, press, assembly and movement, as well as arbitrary arrest and detention, denial of fair public trial, executive influence on the judiciary, property seizures, child labor and forced labor (that also includes children), among other abuses. Amnesty International further found that human rights violations “are committed with almost total impunity by members of the Chadian military, the Presidential Guard, and the state intelligence bureau, the Agence Nationale de Sécurité.”

With Chad, the United States finds itself more deeply involved with yet another authoritarian government and another atrocity-prone proxy force. In this, it continues a long series of mistakes, missteps and mishaps across Africa. These include an intervention in Libya that transformed the country from an autocracy into a near-failed state, training efforts that produced coup leaders in Mali and Burkina Faso, American nation-building that led to a failed state in South Sudan, anti-piracy measures that flopped in the Gulf of Guinea, the many fiascos of the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership, the training of an elite Congolese unit that committed mass rapes and other atrocities, problem-plagued humanitarian efforts in Djibouti and Ethiopia, and the steady rise of terror groups in US-backed countries like Nigeria and Tunisia.