

# Comments on Africa

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## Locating AFRICOM in Africa: African Perspectives

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### Introduction

On February 6, 2007, the Bush administration announced its intention to establish a new unified command – US Africa Command (AFRICOM) – to promote US national security objectives in Africa and its surrounding waters.<sup>1</sup> This announcement was to be followed by the launch of AFRICOM on October 1, 2007 with the appointment of its first ever Commander, General William ‘Kip’ Ward. With the setting up of the Command came the search for its location on the continent of Africa, while it maintained a makeshift headquarters located in Stuttgart (Germany). According to General Ward, for the Command to be effective in implementing its mandate, which includes among other things, stemming conflicts, it needed a physical presence in Africa. He argued that it would take over 27 hours even for a modern day supersonic warplane to travel across the vertical length of the African continent.<sup>2</sup> Thus, locating AFRICOM in Africa would make for easy and quick access to ‘problem spots’.

While Africans have no strong objection to the US initiation of programs meant to advance and enhance her own national interests, the search for a location for AFRICOM in Africa has generated much debate across Africa. These debates have focused on repercussions – the gains and pains – that the location would have on Africa and her peoples. The supposed gains of locating AFRICOM in Africa seem to be summed up in the words of President Bush who argued that AFRICOM would “enhance *America’s* efforts to bring peace and security to the people of Africa”. On the contrary, this commentary takes the view that locating AFRICOM in Africa would bring more pains than gains. The arguments for this stance are advanced below.

### The hype

During the initial search for an African base for AFRICOM, Madam Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the President of Liberia, reportedly supported the proposal to locate the Command in Africa, and proposed Liberia as a possible base for AFRICOM.<sup>3</sup> Madam Sirleaf reportedly touted AFRICOM and its potential to help lift Africa and make it a better place, and urged Africans to embrace its location in Africa. Similarly, President Bush, in announcing America’s intention to establish the Command, said “AFRICOM will enhance America’s efforts to bring peace and security to the people of Africa and further promote America’s goals of development, health, education, democracy, and economic growth in Africa”. These positions, among others, have sought to hype AFRICOM and present it as a ‘great gift’ being bestowed on Africa by the US, with the intention of boosting her developmental efforts.

### Apprehension of many Africans

Notwithstanding the supposed benefits of AFRICOM and its location in Africa, Africans are not persuaded that AFRICOM is the panacea for the myriad of Africa’s problems. Rather, it has fuelled the longstanding perception that the sudden interest in Africa by the US is not, by any stretch of one’s imagination, altruistic. The following are among the reasons thought to be behind US increased interest and the desire to locate AFRICOM in Africa, and which have further fuelled apprehension within the larger African community:

- First, the US clearly has a desirous interest in protecting access to sub-Saharan Africa’s huge hydrocarbon reserves, mainly in the Gulf of Guinea, as part of its drive to reduce its dependence on the unstable and dwindling Middle East supplies, and also as a way of countering China’s quest for Africa’s oil for its rapidly growing economy. Currently, about 28% of China’s oil imports come from Africa, as against America’s 22%, which it hopes to increase

to 25% by 2015. Africa has become a terrain for geopolitical contest for hydrocarbons between the US and China. America's quest to have access to the hydrocarbon reserves in the Gulf of Guinea is further evidenced by the huge presence of its Naval Ships patrolling on the Gulf of Guinea, under the guise of enhancing security in the region. This is further fuelled by the fact that the presence of the two powers – US and China – could re-ignite Cold War tactics where each power would prop-up and support friendly governments that may eventually become repressive of their own people, a situation most Africans are apprehensive of.

■ Second, it has been contended that the sudden interest in Africa and the subsequent establishment of AFRICOM is meant to prevent the “spread of Islamic extremism among the roughly 400m Muslims in Africa”,<sup>4</sup> or as a measure of countering transnational Islamist terrorism. The terrorist attacks on the US embassies in Dar es Salaam in Tanzania and Nairobi in Kenya, both in 1998, as well as other attacks in Mombasa (Kenya, in 2002), and the attacks in Algeria and Morocco in 2007, have been cited as reasons why such a military command be located in Africa to help check and, if possible, destroy such terrorist networks. It is clear that the object of these attacks were either America's assets and interests or those of her allies. It is these kinds of selective attacks by the terrorist networks that make most Africans feel insecure and nervous about AFRICOM and its planned location in Africa. Many believe that America's military presence on the African continent will further endanger their lives. It is difficult to allay fears tied to the belief that terrorism thrives wherever America's interest or presence is. Thus, many Africans worry that rather than helping to combat terrorism in Africa, a huge American presence will increase the spate of terrorist attacks on the continent. This is consistent with an African adage that “if one goes to the farm and brings home maggot-infested firewood, that person only invites the flies home”. In this scenario, the presence of America, via AFRICOM, would make Africans the targets of the terrorists.

■ It is also contended that AFRICOM and its intended location in Africa will contain atrocities and human suffering in the perennial armed conflicts in Africa. Proponents of AFRICOM argue that its location in Africa would enable it deal efficiently, and promptly, whenever such conflicts occur on any part of the continent. Most Africans, however, take this reason as tenuous. Many recall all too vividly, that when it mattered most, America shut its doors to great number of Liberians who were fleeing from the war and had gathered at the gates of America's embassy in Monrovia crying to be allowed in to take refuge on

its premises to save their lives. The best America could do offer in 1990, was to rescue US citizens while leaving Liberia to burn. It took the decisive intervention of the sub-regional organisation, ECOWAS, to bring the situation to normalcy. The memories of such incidents bear indelible scars in the minds of most Africans and thus make the rationale for locating AFRICOM in Africa unconvincing.

## Conclusion

The US seems to have stalled its search for an Africa base for AFRICOM but this desire remains. It should be noted however that the proposed gains of AFRICOM can be achieved without necessarily setting up its base in Africa. This might done, for example, by strengthening local capacity to maintain security as has long been the case; and providing logistical support for the African Standby Force, whose peace and security objective is not dissimilar to AFRICOM's. Any attempt by the US to locate AFRICOM in Africa without addressing the fears and concerns of Africans might spell failure for the entire venture. ■

## Endnotes

- 1 CRS Report for Congress, *Africa Command: US Strategic Interests and the Role of the US Military in Africa*, December 7, 2007.
- 2 At a presentation made at RUSI on February 18, 2008 on 'AFRICOM', Gen. 'Kip' Ward made such a submission.
- 3 Johnson Sirleaf, “Africa: AFRICOM Can Help Governments Willing to Help Themselves”, allAfrica.com (guest forum), June 25, 2007.
- 4 See for instance, “AFRICOM: The United States' New Combatant Command”, IISS Strategic Comments, Vol. 13:2, 2007.

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