A New Training Model Needed for African Militaries

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21 February 2008

		Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188

Report Documentation Page

1. REPORT DATE **21 FEB 2008**	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED **00-00-2008 to 00-00-2008**
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE **A New Training Model Needed for African Militaries**		5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
		5b. GRANT NUMBER
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S)		5d. PROJECT NUMBER
		5e. TASK NUMBER
		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **United States Marine Corps,Command and Staff College, Marine Corps Combat Development,Marine Corps University, 2076 Main St.,Quantico,VA,22134**		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)		10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT **Approved for public release; distribution unlimited**
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES
14. ABSTRACT **See Report**
15. SUBJECT TERMS

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT **unclassified**	b. ABSTRACT **unclassified**	c. THIS PAGE **unclassified**	**Same as Report (SAR)**	**13**	

Introduction

The best part of my deployment to Djibouti Africa during the summer of 2004 was any opportunity to escape the 130 degree summer heat for temporary additional duties (TAD) in one of the surrounding countries. This is why I relished the thought of two weeks TAD to support training a Battalion of Ethiopian military peacekeepers. Like many Americans I had never heard of ACOTA, which stands for Africa Contingency Operations Training and Assistance. But ACOTA was the reason I traveled over 600 miles to a remote base in Bilate Ethiopia to instruct crowd control to the Ethiopian military. I was the only active duty Marine on a team of 11 people. Nine were contractors from Northrop Grumman Technical Services (NGTS), and the other two were myself and a Corpsman who deployed with me from Djibouti to teach basic first aid. We were all there to train the Ethiopian battalion on how to conduct peacekeeping operations under the State Department sponsored program ACOTA. At the end of the two week training period, I concluded that ACOTA was not an effective allocation of resources for a long term capacity building program, because it does not combat the root causes of insecurity in Africa which are poverty, illiteracy, and disease.

Whence it Began

ACOTA was created in 2001 to expand an existing peacekeeping program known as Africa Crisis Response Initiative (ACRI)[1]. ACRI was created in 1997 to "develop basic soldiering and peacekeeping skills…" It focused on "providing common communications gear and support equipment, training ammunition, individual soldier equipment, and peacekeeping support equipment."[2] The goal of ACRI was to develop ten battalions of eight hundred soldiers each with equal capability in logistics, engineering and signal.

In order to make ACRI more palatable and assuage fears of U.S military occupation of Africa, the decision was made to put ACRI under the management of the State Department. Department of Defense remained in charge of implementing and executing the program. Under this program each African battalion received initial sixty to seventy day training with follow-on training provided on a six month repetitive cycle. The training focused on command control training for Battalion level staffs and units, logistics, convoy operations, force protection, marksmanship and protection of noncombatants. After the terrorist attacks of 2001, ACRI was transformed to ACOTA in attempt to expand its role to combat terrorism.[3]

Time to translate

        The Ethiopian battalion was impressive from the
start. They were disciplined, professional and eager to
learn. Beyond that eagerness to learn was the inescapable
evidence of poverty and illiteracy. Ethiopia's current
literacy rate is roughly 50% for adult males as a nation.[4]
In a Battalion of 1000 about two companies can be
considered illiterate. In Bilate illiteracy was at a level
where some students had never stepped foot in a classroom,
nor had they ever touched a pencil.[5] The officers had
varying degrees of English capability. Most of the
students required translation from English to the popular
Ethiopian language Amharic and even further to some other
languages from the remote areas of Ethiopia. What should
have been hour long periods of instruction with practical
application became much longer. In order to transmit all
the material it was decided to simplify most of the classes
to key performance steps and eliminate substantive aspects
of the classes. If ACOTA is going to build successful
African peacekeeping forces, it will have to address
illiteracy within those forces.

Some may argue that soldiers do not need to read and write, and that they only need to follow directions. Critics point out that Ethiopia was one of the few countries to never have been colonized by western powers because of its military prowess. This argument does not take into account that early 20th century battles in the defense of ones country are much different that current deployments into a complex peacekeeping environment. Even a highly trained and well equipped force can suffer significant losses in peacekeeping operations. A peacekeeping force must have an understanding and appreciation of the complex environment of peace support operations. Illiteracy is a hindrance to success in these operations which may require negotiation skills between warring factions. Combating illiteracy falls within ACOTA's stated mission which is to;

"Assist ACOTA Partners to be able to forecast, create, plan, organize, implement, sustain, maintain, and complete complex peace support operations with minimal non-African involvement in the future"[6]

Bureaucratic madness

One of the reasons ACOTA is a misallocation of resources has to do with the program structure itself. It is managed by the State Department Bureau of African Affairs in Washington DC. It is executed in part by the Office of the Secretary of Defense also in Washington DC, but State Department has contracted Northrop Grumman Technical Services and MPRI to conduct the training. Military personnel are currently sourced world wide to support the training via Africa Command. The period of instruction is based on a United Nations approved peacekeeping training package. With so many bureaucracies involved, there are bound to be inefficiencies in resource management.

Based on the below ACOTA "typical battalion training sequence"[7] contractors may need to travel to a country up to three separate times. The inherent costs of travel to each country for the contractors, the cost of the contracting itself, and the per diem costs for military members who support the instruction all add up. In most countries where ACOTA training is conducted, the military bases are far from the capitol city. One after action report from ACOTA training noted that the base was a two day drive from the capitol and that the trip incurred an additional $1500

in travel expenses. Since there were no automated teller machines (ATMs), and no facilities accepted credit cards, individuals were required to carry significant amounts of cash.

A more efficient way to conduct ACOTA training is to establish permanent facilities in a centralized location where African countries could send their forces for instruction. A year long program of peacekeeping studies for the students with instructors permanently stationed at the institutions for two to three year cycles would be ideal. Students could be cycled through the program by country, or joined with several countries. This approach would produce a much more proficient peacekeeping force and would eliminate the current logistical issues encountered by ACOTA trainers.

It is challenging to argue how inefficient the allocation of resources has been when bureaucrats flash the achievements that have been made under ACOTA. The State Department is quick to taut ACOTA's achievements by saying;

As of 15 January 2009, ACOTA has provided training and non-lethal training equipment to 148,066 peacekeepers from African partner militaries since May 1997. ACOTA partners or TCCs include Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger,

Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, and

Zambia. These partners have sent peacekeeping contingents to

varied missions such as Sudan (AMIS, UNAMID and UNMIS), Sierra

Leone (ECOWAS and UNAMSL), Congo (MONUC), Guinea-Bissau, the

Central African Republic (MISAB and MINURCA), Ethiopia-Eritrea

(UNMEE), Cote d'Ivoire (ECOWAS and UNOCI), Liberia (ECOWAS and

UNMIL), Burundi (OMIB and ONUB), Kosovo (UNMIK), Beirut (UNAFIL),

Somalia (AMISOM) and humanitarian relief efforts in Mozambique.[8]

The numbers captured above are a great achievement for
ACOTA but they do not translate into long term program
success. There is consensus that while Africans have made
significant contributions to peace processes on the
continent through diplomacy, their peacekeeping operations
have hit "huge stumbling blocks". Critics of African peace
keeping forces have cited "lack of training, equipment, and
logistic capability to effectively undertake and sustain
such missions…"[9] To have such criticism after eight years
of ACOTA training clearly shows how ineffective the program
has been.

The sobering fact which will cause ACOTA to fall short
of its mission is the fact that it does not combat poverty
and communicable disease. Any traveler to Ethiopia will
quickly be overcome by the poverty in the country. This
was true with the military in Bilate. Although the

soldiers were motivated to conduct the training they did
not have the energy levels to sustain prolonged physical
activities. It was easy to see that they did not get
enough food. It was also easy to see how susceptible they
were to infectious diseases. I often asked myself "How
could I expect these guys to learn crowd control when they
don't have enough to eat?"

The argument that ACOTA is not an aid program, nor is
it a medical program is easy to make. But if ACOTA is
going to achieve any success, it must have as part of the
program a component to combat poverty and infectious
diseases because that is force protection. ACOTA does not
have to combat poverty on the continent—only within the
force. This is why a central peacekeeping academy would be
an efficient use of resources. Soldiers would be removed
from the squalid conditions of their home countries, food
could be provided at the school and most importantly there
would be a hospital to treat sick soldiers. ACOTA already
conducts HIV/AIDs screenings as part of the program however
there are no methods of record keeping within ACOTA.[10] A
hospital would be able to maintain health records on the
peacekeeping force.

ACOTA five years from now

The ACOTA program was formed in large part as a
response to the Somali debacle and the Rwandan genocides.
12 years since its inception there are only two
peacekeeping operations which could be classified as a
success for Africa. This is an abysmal statistic
considering that the ACOTA budget is close to 50 million
dollars and more in resources. This can only be attributed
to the lack of a concentrated effort to build a
peacekeeping force outside of the squalid conditions that
are prevalent on the continent. IF there is to be a viable
African peacekeeping force, it must be trained at a central
facility where it can be shielded from poverty and disease.
The function of the training facility must be to build
capacity for that force to function independently, and that
means reducing illiteracy.

ACOTA will continue to only be a nice gesture to show
that the U.S cares about peace in Africa if it continues to
function the way it has for the last 12 years. If it is
going to make significant breakthroughs, ACOTA will have to
divert resources to a central training Academy where real
mentoring, training, and learning can occur for African
peacekeeping forces. Growth will only be achieved outside

of the conditions which keep soldiers illiterate, in
poverty and sick. My TAD trip to Ethiopia convinced me
that this was the most viable solution to the challenge.
The next five years will be the most critical time for
ACOTA. Under a central training facility there can be five
classes graduated who are far more proficient than any
force that could be trained under the current ACOTA model.
Even company size classes similar the Marine Corps entry
level training schools would be more proficient more
successful the masses trained under ACOTA. ACOTA must
consider this new training model.

<p align="center">1,842 words</p>

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[3] Ohaegbulam, U.F. (2004). U.S Policy in Postcolonial Africa; Four Case Studies in Conflict Resolution. (New York: Peter Lang),247-249.

[4] https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/print/et.html

[5] Author's personal experience and conversations with Ethiopian military personnel

[6] Personal correspondence via e-mail February 5th 2009 with State Department ACOTA representative Mr. Brendan P. Mooney

[7] State Department ACOTA power point presentation from State Department ACOTA representative Mr. Brendan P. Mooney

[8] State Department ACOTA Program Summary from State Department ACOTA representative Mr. Brendan P. Mooney

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