



Planners from the African Union, the United Nations, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the U.S. Department of State, the U.S. military, the Center of Excellence for Stability Police Units, and several African militaries discuss the details of exercise scenarios 6 February 2016 during the Unified Focus 2017 final planning event in Douala, Cameroon. The event brought partner-nation planners together to discuss and shape the inaugural Unified Focus exercise, which was designed to enhance and enable Lake Chad Basin Commission nations to support Multi-national Joint Task Force counter-Boko Haram operations. (Photo by author)

# Many Voices Telling One Story

## Public Affairs Operations across Africa in Support of Combatant Commanders

Capt. Jason Welch, U.S. Army

Every year the U.S. Army conducts exercises, security cooperation activities, train-and-equip missions, and senior leader engagements across Africa in an effort to enhance the capability and capacity of African militaries to promote regional security and stability. U.S. Army Africa (USARAF) public affairs officers (PAOs) are responsible for telling this Army story to the U.S. public and must overcome challenges across the continent to do so. Strategic and operational communication in Africa requires U.S. military personnel to coordinate between multiple interagency, interorganizational, and international partners; overcome culture shock and bridge cultural divides; and face the physical and technical challenges of distance.

Army PAOs must step outside traditional military leadership roles to communicate effectively on behalf of the command in this environment. The organizations and relationships involved are dynamic, sometimes temporary, and often complex. Public affairs professionals must analyze the information environment

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and identify potential coalition partners that can communicate a cohesive message through different media and transmission vectors. Then they must lead these loosely bonded networks, providing feedback to partners to encourage continued communication and support to operational narratives and objectives. Public affairs professionals who support activities across Africa at all echelons must take on the role of diplomats, team managers, logisticians, teachers, advisors, and content producers. Officers and noncommissioned officers must be equipped with the skills and experience to

conduct planning and coordination for large-scale and strategic missions while simultaneously executing tactical-level tasks such as photography, writing, editing, media escort, and advising military leaders.

Successful public affairs across Africa means that public affairs professionals have to cross the divides separating cultures, languages, organizations, and governments to consolidate many voices into one.

## **Point 1: Interagency/ Interorganizational Coordination**

*Commitment to interorganizational cooperation can facilitate cooperation in areas of common interest, promote a common operational picture, and enable sharing of critical information and resources.*

—Joint Publication 3-08, *Interorganizational Cooperation*<sup>1</sup>

Any public affairs activity undertaken in Africa must be coordinated with both U.S. and host-nation government agencies. In each individual nation across the continent, the U.S. Department of State (DOS) is the lead U.S. government agency, and the U.S. ambassador to that country is the chief of mission. U.S. military commands coordinate with their DOS counterparts to ensure their activities are nested within the existing whole-of-government approach for each nation. All public military communication is coordinated through the respective U.S. embassy public affairs office, the office of security cooperation, the defense attaché, and the command's security cooperation division. Only then can cooperation begin with foreign partners and other U.S. agencies outside of the Department of Defense (DOD) and the DOS.<sup>2</sup>

Communicators involved in a mission or activity in Africa come from across the joint military force of each participating nation; different government agencies; nongovernmental organizations (NGOs); and local, regional, and international news media organizations.<sup>3</sup> PAOs must be prepared to lead diverse teams originating from different units, branches, and even countries. The public affairs team that supported the USARAF-led exercise Central Accord 2016, held in Libreville, Gabon, was one such team. Central Accord 2016 was a multinational, joint, field and command-post exercise involving more than one thousand troops from over fourteen participating African and European militaries.<sup>4</sup> The exercise involved multiple airborne drops, field maneuvers, attendance at a jungle warfare school,



and live-fire exercises. The public affairs footprint across the area of operations consisted of

- ◆ the USARAF PAO team;
- ◆ the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division PAO team;
- ◆ the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division PAO;
- ◆ the 49th Public Affairs Detachment;
- ◆ a 55th Signal Company (Combat Camera) team;
- ◆ an American Forces Network Europe broadcast journalist;
- ◆ a Defense Media Activity photographer from Sembach, Germany;
- ◆ a Gabonese public affairs officer;
- ◆ a U.S. Marine Corps PAO acting as an observer/controller-trainer;
- ◆ a Cameroonian public affairs warrant officer; and
- ◆ German information operations officers.

On just the U.S. side of public affairs, four branches of the Armed Forces were represented: Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force.

Each of these individuals and teams represented an organization and command with its own unique background, training, expectations, and goals to achieve during the exercise. It was the responsibility of the lead PAO to plan and execute a single comprehensive public affairs mission that would unify all the disparate actors into one team. This task required months of coordination

Staff Sgt. Shejal Pulivarti (*left*), U.S. Army Africa public affairs, demonstrates her still imagery equipment to partner public affairs professionals from Ghana, Liberia, and Germany 24 May 2017 during exercise United Accord 2017 in Accra, Ghana. United Accord 17 was a U.S. Army Africa and African partner-nation command-post and field-training exercise designed to increase the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) capacity to plan, deploy, sustain, and redeploy a MINUSMA-led and U.S.-sponsored combined joint task force in support of UN and African Union-mandated peacekeeping operations. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Army Africa)

through the U.S. embassy public affairs office and the office of security cooperation to ensure the plan was nested within the existing U.S. operational strategy in Gabon, and to build a relationship with the Gabonese military that would allow for free access to maneuver and conduct public affairs tasks across the area of operations.

Logistics for each team member had to be resolved, from commercial air travel into Gabon, to movement of equipment, to local transportation between and life support at five distinct areas of major activity, and finally to the first U.S. global response force airborne jump into Gabon that brought the final elements of the team together. Each member of the team had to complete the theater entry requirements and possess an official passport with a Gabonese visa or waiver prior to arrival. The lead public affairs office was also responsible



for the coordination between USARAF, Air Mobility Command, and the 82nd Airborne Division that brought participating U.S. news media representatives to the exercise in C-17 aircraft in the first military embed of *Army Times* reporters in over five years.<sup>5</sup>

Overcoming U.S. DOD and DOS bureaucratic requirements to bring a disparate team together for an exercise is one example of the interagency and interorganizational coordination required of a public affairs professional in Africa. Working alongside African partner PAOs is another challenge that requires PAOs to become both military planner and international diplomat. The annual African Land Forces Summit brings together the land force chiefs of African militaries from across the continent. In 2016 and 2017, more than forty African partner militaries participated.<sup>6</sup> The summit rotates between nations and regions, held most recently in Tanzania, Malawi, and Nigeria, respectively. The host nation has the lead authority and responsibility for planning and conducting the event, including coordinating and escorting local and regional news media representatives.

The U.S. public affairs professional who is responsible for the event must begin months in advance, working

(From left) Lt. Gen. Paul Mihova, Zambian Army commander; Eric Schultz, the U.S. ambassador to Zambia; Vice Adm. Michael Franken, U.S. Africa Command deputy commander for military operations; and Maj. Gen. Darryl A. Williams, U.S. Army Africa commanding general, talk to local and international media following a live-fire exercise 13 August 2015 during Southern Accord 2015. Southern Accord was a command-post and field-training exercise that brought together partner militaries from across southern Africa, Europe, and the United States to exercise peacekeeping operations skills in a scenario reflecting the ongoing mission in the Central African Republic. (Photo by author)

with the DOS and DOD teams, and building a relationship with the host-nation PAO. This relationship is crucial to navigating the unique bureaucratic requirements of the host-nation military and government and establishing a unified communication plan for the summit. In Tanzania and Malawi, the host-nation PAO was the local expert. They accredited the local media and stringers for international wire services and provided transportation and access to venues. The relationship with the host-nation PAO in both situations led to a united communication effort, maintaining the security of the summit by

preventing unaccredited personnel from entering the area posing as media and demonstrating the effectiveness and professionalism of a united team. Because of the months of coordinating and face-to-face meetings, the Tanzanian and Malawian public affairs teams operated side-by-side with the U.S. public affairs team, sharing office space, vehicles, and tasks throughout both summits.

This interagency and interorganizational experience builds professionalism in both U.S. and African-partner public affairs institutions, and contributes to the USARAF line of effort to set the theater by strengthening relationships between public affairs professionals and local, regional, and international news media representatives. Public affairs professionals are de facto diplomats, negotiating and building rapport with their host-nation and international partners, and representing the interests of the U.S. government during engagements with both military and civilians across the continent. Even the smallest task becomes strategic in nature. PAOs accredit, escort, and arrange engagements with media journalists who may work as both local reporters and as stringers for international tier-one media organizations such as Agence France-Presse, Reuters, and Bloomberg News. They also gather imagery, video, and quotes from African and U.S. senior leaders to publish in stories and social media posts. Their products not only shape public understanding of the U.S. military but also the African partner military and government in the story or post. It is imperative that there is a relationship between the U.S. and African partner public affairs professionals to prevent misrepresentation of one another in the public information environment. It is also key to maintaining transparency with key stakeholders and audiences.

## Point 2: Culture Shock

*Culture shock: A sense of confusion and uncertainty sometimes with feelings of anxiety that may affect people exposed to an alien culture or environment without adequate preparation.*

—Merriam-Webster Dictionary<sup>7</sup>

Africa is the second largest continent in the world, with the second largest population.<sup>8</sup> There are over 1,500 languages and dialects spoken across fifty-four countries with diverse religious and tribal cultures.<sup>9</sup> For U.S. PAOs striving to communicate with key audiences, each country presents a unique challenge in religious,

environmental, popular, and bureaucratic culture. PAOs must overcome the culture shock of working with partners who are restricted by their environment and organizations, and who view their roles in the communication process differently. It is important for all military leaders to maintain a sense of humility and not project their own preconceived ideals upon other cultures with different social and cultural norms.

Language barriers may be the most obvious obstacle to overcome; however, it is not as simple as coordinating for French, Portuguese, or Arabic interpreters. While Francophone and Lusophone (Portuguese-language) nations are prevalent throughout sub-Saharan Africa, and Arabophone nations exist mostly across the Saharan and Sahel regions, thousands of tribal dialects must be factored into communication plans. Local journalists may claim to speak English, French, or Arabic, but it is often not their primary language, and military jargon and themes can be easily lost in translation. Often, partner military PAOs are fluent in the regional dialects, or their staff members are, and can provide a bridge to local news media representatives and community leaders. During the USARAF-led multinational peacekeeping exercise Southern Accord 2015, held in Lusaka, Zambia, one Zambian Defense Force sergeant major was fluent or familiar with over half of the forty-six languages and tribal dialects across Zambia, an Anglophone nation. Each member of the Zambian public relations team spoke at least three dialects in addition to English, and they worked as a team to keep the invited media properly informed about progress and status during the exercise.

PAOs should not only factor interpretation into their plan to disseminate communication but also in how they will assess the effectiveness of their efforts afterward. The U.S. embassy public affairs teams often have local nationals that are familiar with the local media environment, can facilitate communication and arrange engagements, provide valuable cultural advice, and conduct media assessments or analyses during exercises and contingencies. Assessment of media operations is hampered in areas where media organizations are not publishing their content online, rather only using printed hard copy, local television, and radio. In these instances, it is important to have a strong relationship with the U.S. embassy public affairs team that routinely monitors and evaluates these media organizations and can provide vital feedback to military PAOs in assessing their efforts.

African militaries are often legacy organizations reflecting the customs and practices of their former colonial heritage. Breaking through the vertical and centralized hierarchy of our partner military communicators requires patience, preparation, and resources. Moreover, there is an aversion to risk taking for many of our military partners and a hesitation to do anything that is not clearly aligned with the political will and intent of the party in power. The African-partner planners who attend planning events on the continent in preparation for exercises and summits are action officers but are not empowered with decision-making authority. This task is withheld at much higher echelons.

Likewise, African-partner military and government spokespersons are often limited to the senior echelons of their respective organizations. During the USARAF-led peacekeeping exercise Eastern Accord 2016 in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, the only Tanzanian People's Defence Force soldier permitted to speak to media—including U.S. Army public affairs journalists—was the senior commander, a brigadier general. There were two other brigadier generals from Tanzania that were participating in the exercise, but they lacked the relationship with the land force commander and his senior staff, and were not permitted to speak publicly.

Communication can also be stove-piped between organizations within the partner-nation government. In Cameroon, the military spokesperson is a senior colonel and is permitted to speak on behalf of the Ministry of Defense, but he must coordinate any public speaking engagement with the Ministry of Communications. This can be difficult during contingency operations when other actors in the area, such as NGOs and international organizations, are releasing information quickly and the host-nation military is not. PAOs can mitigate this challenge through coordination and relationship building prior to contingency operations, but they must also be prepared to navigate this restricted timeline once on the ground, coordinating with the DOS team, partner military, and even NGOs and other interorganizational partners to cut through bureaucratic obstacles or coordinate releases between multiple organizations.

In addition to organizational restrictions, PAOs must work with military partners that view the public affairs mission very differently. For many African partners, public affairs is also public relations and information operations, and a tool to influence the thinking and

behavior of target audiences, often in direct support to an operational commander. For example, Cameroonian PAOs build communication plans to fulfill three pillars: image, influence, and action. Their first priority is to protect the image of the organization. Then, they seek to influence thought and behavior in target audiences. Finally, they look for actionable results in key populations like increased voter turnout, or decreased protesting against government forces.

Among such organizations, credibility is less important than speaking the party line, and African PAOs are hesitant to work with certain journalists or release information about controversial activities when it may hurt their organizational image or fail to influence audiences toward a designated goal. Objective and accurate reporting by journalists is not highly regarded by these nations' governments; journalists that question the activities of the military or legitimacy of the government are sometimes blacklisted or, in the extreme, jailed and prosecuted. Accredited media are seen as those news media representatives who have historically told favorable stories about their activities and can be trusted to maintain the party line and not critique the government or military.

As a result, U.S. PAOs may see the benefit of amplifying a specific event to key audiences, but their military partner may not understand the reason so many resources should be allotted to a seemingly insignificant exercise or activity. PAOs often deal with this challenge, working to amplify a multinational training exercise that is unable to garner robust public affairs support from their host-nation partner. The exercise is not necessarily a priority for the host-nation military and may not warrant the same attention that U.S. PAOs give it.

This discrepancy is especially true for military partners that are currently dealing with violent extremism or unrest within their own borders. They have real-world military operations being conducted within their nation and often an internal audience that has been deemed an enemy of the state or, in the very least, in opposition to the current ruling political party. The communications objective regarding these audiences will be to sway their thought and behavior to preserve the legitimacy of the government and the integrity of the nation. Conversely, U.S. PAOs are trained and grounded in the DOD Principles of Information, the legally binding mandate to inform key audiences of all military activities in a timely and accurate manner.<sup>10</sup>



In an environment where information and the communication of that information is seen as a tool of political power, it is a challenge to maintain objective credibility with U.S. audiences.

U.S. PAOs must therefore put a priority on establishing a trusted relationship with their African partners to work through this difference of intent regarding communication. Being open and honest with a partner while making a concerted effort to understand the political pressure they are feeling is key to the formation of a cohesive team and the presentation of a unified communication strategy.

### Point 3: Challenges of Distance and Technology

*Reading and hearing about Africa is one thing; experiencing it directly is quite another. We know that Africa is not a country, but it is a continent like none other. It has that which is elegantly vast or awfully little.*

—L. Douglas Wilder<sup>11</sup>

Command Sgt. Maj. Christopher Gilpin speaks via Skype to television journalists from Savannah, Georgia, May 2016 while attending the African Land Forces Summit (ALFS) 2016 in Arusha, Tanzania. ALFS is an annual, weeklong seminar that brings land-force chiefs from across Africa together to discuss and develop cooperative solutions to regional and transregional challenges and threats. ALFS 2016 was hosted by U.S. Army Africa and the Tanzanian Peoples' Defense Force. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Army Africa)

The continent of Africa is over thirty million square kilometers and can fit the entirety of Europe, India, China, and the continental United States within its borders.<sup>12</sup> Commercial flights from the United States can take an entire day. A single Air France flight from Paris to Johannesburg is over ten hours long. While technology is growing across Africa, developing infrastructure still limits access to digital resources and lines of communication. According to a 2015 Pew Research Center report, more than two-thirds of adults in Africa own a cell phone, but less than a quarter of these are

smartphones, and less than 2 percent of Africans have a landline in their home.<sup>13</sup> In Malawi, the U.S. embassy in Lilongwe estimated that only 10 percent of the population is part of the electrical grid and that less than 5 percent have access to the internet. Power generation is a concern, with grids that are unreliable during the rainy season or dependent upon hydroelectric power in drought-plagued areas. PAOs must learn to adapt to technologically austere environments and operate with little to no additional resources for long periods of time.

During the 2014 Ebola outbreak in western Africa, the U.S. military was asked to respond in support of United States Agency for International Development efforts in Liberia. Operation United Assistance brought a USARAF-led joint task force to the small western African nation in increments.<sup>14</sup> Flights were limited, and space on those aircraft was taken up by supplies and personnel considered essential to the mission. While military and civilian leaders stateside were requesting imagery from the mission, and news media representatives were asking for access and interviews, the public affairs presence on the ground was limited to three personnel, and early communication guidance from the DOD and DOS was restrictive, preventing imagery from reaching stateside news media organizations.<sup>15</sup> It took time for the appropriate resources to be brought into country with a joint public affairs support element arriving two weeks after the main body and a public affairs detachment months later. Some of the delays in resources were caused by the bureaucratic timeline to secure them, but some were due to limited infrastructure and living space on the ground in Monrovia, Liberia. PAOs can anticipate similar conditions in future contingency operations and must be prepared to operate alone or with limited resources for extended periods of time.

Activities conducted in the United States, Europe, and even some Asia-Pacific regions typically cover much smaller land areas and can be supported by existing infrastructure that has been developed over decades of joint and combined partnerships. Internet access is more readily available, telecommunication lines exist, power generation equipment is more prevalent, and digital communication methods are taken for granted. Throughout Africa, infrastructure varies, and it is common to lose power during the rainy season, droughts, or after hard rains have washed out grid infrastructure. Bandwidth is extremely limited, delaying or preventing

the transmission of imagery or video products. Local news media representatives sometimes do not have access to digital or online resources. They may not have the ability to take their own photographs or video, and may look to the on-ground PAOs to provide additional working space, internet access, transportation, and even food. It is not at all uncommon for partner-nation PAOs to pay for journalists to attend an event; such a practice is not considered unethical in their organizations. Without this stipend, many journalists cannot afford to cover military activities, and they use the money to pay for transportation or to rent photographic equipment or space in an internet café to produce their stories for their news media organizations.

For U.S. military PAOs, it can be frustrating when traditional methods of transmitting media stateside do not function. PAOs must plan and work in advance and integrate with operational planners in every operation to ensure their communication requirements are taken into account. These considerations include dedicated internet contracts, internationally capable phones, transportation for both public affairs teams and news media representatives, and power generation for equipment. Host-nation militaries often cannot provide these resources and will request to use the infrastructure and equipment the U.S. military provides. Furthermore, the Defense Video Imagery Distribution System portable satellite transmitter, the designated method for transmitting U.S. military public affairs imagery, print, and video products from deployed areas and for conducting live interviews with stateside journalists, has not been successfully utilized in Africa in recent years. Public affairs teams must rely on local infrastructure or the limited bandwidth of mobile internet devices and satellite phones.

Additionally, distance from the United States inhibits timely coordination and delays the ability for reinforcing operators on the ground. If a partner unit located in California or Alaska submits a request for information, response time can take twenty-four hours. The long flight time from the United States, coupled with the need to undergo a complex theater-entry process, limits what personnel and resources can be brought to bear on any activity across the continent.

During the USARAF-led exercise Unified Focus 2017, held in Douala, Cameroon, the public affairs support team traveling from the United States was unable to procure airplane tickets just before departure. The



exercise was scheduled to last a single week, and there was not enough time to source another team from the United States, gain theater entry clearance, issue visas, and fly them to the exercise location. The PAO on the ground was left to support the event alone. There are no local units or installations to request support from in Africa. PAOs who are in the middle of a mission must be prepared to conduct *all* the tasks required of an entire team of public affairs professionals, to include escorting media, advising and preparing leaders, taking photographs and video, and writing stories.

## Conclusion

Africa is a vast continent, physically and culturally, and presents unique challenges to U.S. public affairs professionals tasked with operating there. PAOs must quickly adapt to situations and take on tasks they are not specifically trained for or experienced in. Additionally, they must build bridges that cross both

cultural and organizational boundaries, linking together disparate entities and actors, and guiding them toward a common goal. All these efforts must be executed across a landscape three times the size of the United States and without the infrastructure and resources they are accustomed to in the United States.

As a result, because contingencies will arise unexpectedly, PAOs assigned for service in Africa must constantly prepare for unforeseen events, honing their craft and familiarizing themselves with the region while building relationships when possible to shape future opportunities. In this region, the PAO must become the diplomat to cross boundaries, the logistician to overcome the challenge of distance and technology, the technician to produce content, and the team manager to bring together a unique joint force capable of telling the U.S. Army and U.S. military story worldwide. Taking on many roles enables this comprehensive professional to merge many individuals to weave their efforts into one voice. ■

## Notes

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