

News

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CJTF HOA: Long-Term Solutions to Combating Terrorism

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Editor's note: Anton Menning is a contributing reporter for the Leavenworth Times who has been embedded with a military unit as part of the "Natural Fire" exercise in Africa. As the only U.S. reporter participating in the exercise, Menning will present stories during the next two weeks about the training exercise and other endeavors by U.S. military forces in Africa. This is the first part of a series of reports.

Nairobi, Kenya— Fighting terrorism in its own way, the Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa assembled more than 1,000 servicemen from Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and the United States to participate in the military exercise known as "Natural Fire."



(Submitted photo) U.S. Marine Corps personnel from 1st Battalion, 23rd Marine Regiment, stationed at Marine Reserve Center in Houston, arrive at Nairobi International Airport in support of Exercise "Natural Fire" on Aug. 6 in Nairobi, Kenya.

"Natural Fire exemplifies the commitment between East African community nations and the U.S.," said U.S. Navy Rear Admiral Richard Hunt, CJTF HOA commander. "In addition to the field training events, the humanitarian projects will provide critical medical supplies, engineering support and services in rural regions of Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya."

"Natural Fire," an exercise based on a theoretical natural disaster in the region, reflects the unique mission of CJTF HOA. The task force was formed in 2002 to combat terrorism by building infrastructure, providing military-to-military training and giving humanitarian assistance to regional allies.

CJTF HOA, headquartered at Camp Lemonier in Djibouti, encompasses members from all the major U.S. services — Marines, Air Force, Army and Navy. In addition, regional governmental militaries provide resources to make the task force a multinational initiative.

The presence of U.S. military forces highlights the need for security in the Horn of Africa. The Horn, encompassing Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea and Ethiopia, has long been associated with instability. A failed government in Somalia and recent regional warfare between Eritrea and Ethiopia, combined with weak governance abilities of established states, threaten the traditionally stable governments of East Africa. In addition, continuing unrest in Darfur and a smoldering conflict in Northern Uganda underscore the importance of building regional capacity to combat centrifugal forces in the region.

According to HOA Command, "Natural Fire" builds upon and enlarges existing projects and initiatives already under way.

"This exercise is focused on humanitarian natural disaster preparedness," said U.S. Navy Captain Timothy Moon, exercise deputy commander. "We get into everything from collective security, to the ability to work together, resolve command and control issues and look at the basic capabilities of each country."

"Natural Fire" combines elements of CJTF HOA with approximately 450 Marine Reservists and assorted Civil Affairs soldiers.

Almost 80 members of the 6th Marine Engineering Support Battalion, divided between Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, will work with local forces to renovate schools, build water tanks and undertake other engineering missions in the region, said U.S. Marine Corps Lt. Col. Vince Sumang, commanding officer of the 6th Battalion contingent.



(Submitted photo) U.S. Marine Corps personnel from 1st Battalion, 23rd Marine Regiment arrive at Nairobi International Airport in support of Exercise "Natural Fire".

The Marine contribution to "Natural Fire" also includes elements of the 4th Medical Battalion. Although the detachment's mission is to provide immediate medical care to servicemen involved in the exercise, the unit commander, U.S. Navy Commander Tom McGailliard, looks forward to both exploring Kenyan medical capacity and sharing Marine expertise.

Participating CA units will administer Medical Civil Action Plans (MEDCAPS) in conjunction with Veterinarian Civil Action Plans (VETCAPS). MED and VETCAPS consist of CA doctors and veterinarians with associated supporting staff, administering medical aid to local residents and their livestock. The aid can be in the form of preventive vaccinations or actual medical treatment to address various maladies ranging from malaria to sleeping sickness.

"The beauty of this exercise is the projects are geared towards a handover to the local countries," Moon said. "We are passing on our expertise to help develop capabilities. When we leave, local militaries will have our humanitarian skill-set in dealing with natural disasters."

Because the effectiveness of many initiatives in Africa often diminishes or outright fails after foreign entities depart, CJTF HOA devotes significant time and resources to feasibility studies

before it undertakes any engineering or humanitarian project. The projects also feature a gradual transition to local administration. In the case of water drilling projects, drillers install hand or solar pumps to ensure long-term project survivability.

In fact, the task force refuses to renovate a school until it has a guarantee from USAID to supply textbooks. This ensures projects will not be started and never completed, Moon said.

"Instead of handing out American pharmaceuticals at clinics, we work with the host nation so they manufacture and purchase their own medicine," HOA Task Force spokesperson Major David Westover said.

In addition to humanitarian activities, "Natural Fire" features military-to-military training. Elements of the 1st Battalion, 23rd Marine Division will assist the Kenyan military with counter-terrorism training and defensive tactics. In Uganda, A Company 1st Battalion, 16th Infantry Division, based at Fort Riley, will perform the same duty with the Ugandan military.

Because "Natural Fire" features cooperation between four different countries, challenges abound. The exercise was coordinated between the military and State Department entities in each country.

"We spent six months planning this operation," Moon said.

From a military standpoint, U.S. forces stand to gain experience in joint operations and cultural awareness.

"We tell every Marine, soldier, sailor and airman they are representatives of the United States," Moon said. "You cannot expect to understand or influence the local populace unless you participate. 'Natural Fire' affords us this chance."

"When we get to the point where it's Africans solving African problems, we won't have to be here and will have succeeded," Moon said.