

AFRICOM: Forging New Chains

By Naomi Maina

Is it conceivable that a massive foreign military apparatus was created with intentions that were merely benign and solely in the interests of security for the African people?

The U.S. has divided the entire world into military commands(1), providing its military with missions in time of war or peace. Africa Command, or AFRICOM, is the newest of the six U.S. regional commands. When AFRICOM was formed in 2007, it joined five other U.S. commands: Northern Command, Southern Command, Pacific Command, Central Command, and the European Command.(2)

President George W. Bush ostensibly formed this new military agency to strengthen U.S. security cooperation with Africa and help to create new opportunities to bolster the capabilities of Africa's military. He indicated that it would enhance U.S. efforts to help bring peace and security to the people of Africa and promote common goals for development, health, education, democracy, and economic growth in Africa.(3)



Contemporary sculpture in Tanzania, a departure point for the slave trade; the sculptor employed the actual historical chains in this work. Will Africa find itself in chains again, this time forged by “partnerships” under Africom?

While Bush gave these benevolent reasons for the establishment of this command (and, in its web site, AFRICOM, itself, claims goals and functions that are unobjectionable), there has been public concern and skepticism about the legitimacy of these reasons. To understand this skepticism, one need only look at other instances of America’s benevolent and charitable involvement in Africa.

Concern over the future of Africa is nothing new in the Western world. In fact, since the dawn of African independence, Western countries have been Africa’s knight in shining armor, eagerly offering to ameliorate one perceived need after another.

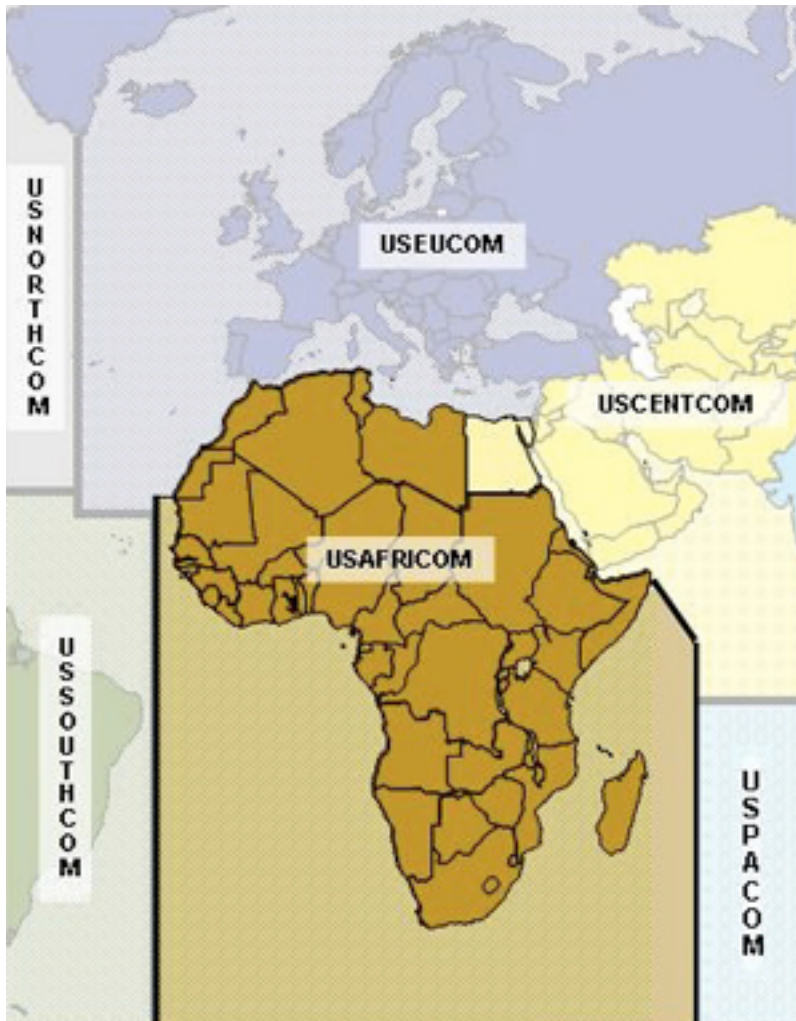
After independence from Britain and other European powers to the late 1980s, the supplying of these perceived needs by the West took the form of direct economic and military support. When it gave massive amounts of financial aid to Africa, in seeming acts of generosity, it was because it wanted to use African governments as proxies in its Cold War machinations against the Soviet Union.

When that approach reached its limits and failed to produce meaningful results, the West changed its focus, embarking in the 1990s on a plan to remake African economies through structural adjustment programs, i.e., economic reforms in which African countries were forced to privatize public companies, open their markets to the rest of the world, and reduce spending on critical services such as healthcare and education. That program, cooked up and designed entirely by experts in London, Paris, and Washington and imposed on powerless African governments, failed miserably as well.

In the above cases, the attitude of the U.S. and the West was one of concern, even solicitude, for the wellbeing of Africa and its citizens. Yet this attitude belied subtle—and sometimes crass—acts of self-interest. When it forced structural adjustment programs on Africa, it was because it wanted open markets for its goods and services—expanded markets naturally boosted business and profits for American corporations.

For decades, the West, especially the United States, responded generously to acute famines and political instability in Africa, shipping tons of food and medicines to countries and refugee camps. In early 2000s, Africa was in the grip of the AIDS pandemic, and this too sent Western countries scurrying to Africa, with money and plans for containing the disease.

The benefits of that are obvious: American corporations and businesses thrived in friendly countries, to say nothing of all the weapons that were sold to these regimes. Even the much-heralded AIDS program that pumped billions of dollars to African countries was designed in such a way that American pharmaceutical companies reaped a windfall—cheaper generic drugs were excluded from the program, thus making sure that the bulk of the money went to Big Pharma and their brand name drugs. It appears as if America's aid policy is designed with a "clawback" provision, where money that is given away is cleverly recovered—but by big business, not by U.S. taxpayers who pay for the aid.



A full-spectrum combatant command, U.S. AFRICOM is responsible for all U.S. Department of Defense operations, exercises, and security cooperation on the African continent, its island nations, and surrounding waters.

Map: U.S. DoD

If American policy towards Africa (including programs that effectuate those policies) is inherently designed to ultimately benefit American companies, is it conceivable that a massive military apparatus such as AFRICOM was created merely to serve the benign purposes of African security?

This question erases from our minds the issue of American benevolence, and leaves one strong and defensible possibility: oil and imperialism as the motive forces behind AFRICOM.

Political analyst Michael Parenti(4) defines imperialism as the process whereby the dominant politico-economic interests of one nation expropriate for their own enrichment the land, labor, raw materials, and markets of another people. This helps to explain the concerns of Africans over the formation of AFRICOM.

The U.S. has become increasingly dependent on Africa for its oil needs. At the time of the establishment of AFRICOM, the Middle East was in turmoil following the U.S. invasion of Iraq. The political and security environment in the Middle East was so precarious that U.S. policymakers were beginning to look at Africa as a safer, less radicalized alternative to the chaotic Persian Gulf. Africa is currently one of the largest suppliers of U.S. crude oil, with Nigeria being the fifth largest source. The U.S. National Intelligence Council has projected that African imports will account for 25% of total U.S. imports by 2015.(5)

Once the U.S. identifies a country or a region as a place with unique American interests, several things take place, none of which are necessarily good for the local people or their governments.

First, the U.S. organizes the country's affairs in such a way that its interests come first every time. American interests will override all other interests—be it peace, just governance, equity of resources, or whatever else may benefit the local population. It is always the case governments will not protect American interests and the interests of the country's citizens, for the interests of the two are mutually exclusive. We know from experience in the Middle East, that the U.S. has protected dictators and regimes based entirely on how well they protect American interests, not how well they serve the welfare of their own people.

Second, the politics of dissent and competitive ideas will suffer as a result. Given that the American corporate and military wishes will always carry the day, there will be an attempt to squelch dissenters and their views. This will greatly hamper democratic space and will limit people's freedom, not just of expression but also of alternative policy ideas—especially those ideas that may challenge American dominance of the country's natural resources.

Third, the presence of American military, whether in the form of boots on the ground or drones in the air, will exert such a coercive force that citizens and politicians who dare oppose American positions will be ostracized, or live in constant fear of imminent harm. As Menan Jangu,(6) an environmental activist in Tanzania, points out in Social justice, peace, and environmental education, "systems of domination and resource extraction cannot be imposed or sustained without force or the threat of force." The presence of AFRICOM will be a constant reminder to dissenters that a powerful force, unaccountable to local laws and institutions, is always ready to make its presence felt.



Wooring Women: In Botswana April 2013, the U.S. Army tries to persuade African partners to integrate women into their defense forces. U.S. Africom Fact Sheet, "ASARAF Soldiers Continue Women Integration Efforts in Africa," Public Affairs, U.S. Army Africa

Photo: U.S. Army Africa

This point should be a warning to all those who think that U.S. control, as well as that of its allies, is business as usual, and that Africa will survive the AFRICOM phase of foreign domination. But AFRICOM is not business as usual. It does what has not been done to date, which is to militarize aid and other humanitarian activities, including economic aid and delivery of medical care. AFRICOM then, more than any other form of U.S.-Africa cooperation, changes that relationship, which was unequal to begin with, into a coercive and supervisory one.

As Parenti puts it perceptively:

"It is important to note that the U.S. does not "train" military personnel just for the purpose of safeguarding the people's interests. It should be understood that since World War II, the U.S. government has given over \$200 billion in military aid to train, equip, and subsidize more than 2.3 million troops and internal security forces in some eighty countries, the purpose being not to defend them from outside invasions but to protect ruling oligarchs and multinational corporate investors from the dangers of domestic anti-capitalist insurgency."(7)

An awareness of this should definitely concern those who really do care about the continent and the welfare of its people.

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1. Bruce Blair, Brian Ellison et al, (2007) Military almanac prepared by the straus military reform project (Washington, DC: The World Security Institute's Center for Defense Information).
2. Before AFRICOM was instituted, the U.S. military had divided Africa between three different commands: European Command which oversaw North Africa and most of sub-Saharan Africa; Central Command, which had responsibility for Egypt and the Horn of Africa; and Pacific Command, which administered the Indian Ocean and Madagascar. Tuckey B. (2009). Resist AFRICOM.
3. Whelan, T. (2011). Why AFRICOM? An American perspective.
4. Parenti, M. (1995). Against empire. City Lights Publishers.
5. Okumu, D. W. (2011). Africa Command: opportunity for enhanced engagement or the militarization of US-Africa relations?
6. Butler, N. and Jangu, M. (2009). "A past is not a heritage." Social justice, peace, and environmental education: Transformative standards. Andrzejewski, J., Baltodano, M., & Symcox, L. (Eds.) Routledge.
7. Parenti, M. (1995). Against empire. City Lights Publishers.