

US Navy Begins Training Deployment to West Africa

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A U.S. Navy ship leaves Tuesday for a seven month deployment to West Africa as part of increased U.S. military engagement with the continent following a series of regional meetings and requests. But in his first news conference since becoming the first head of the new U.S. Africa Command two weeks ago, General William Ward says the question of where to put his headquarters may not be answered for some time. VOA's Al Pessin reports from the Pentagon.

The amphibious ship USS Fort McHenry will leave the U.S. naval base at Norfolk, Virginia on Tuesday to establish what the navy calls Africa Partnership Station off the coast of West Africa.

Officials say the goal is to provide what they call a "persistent presence" in the Gulf of Guinea area, without needing to put large numbers of troops ashore. Officials say the ship, and another that will join the mission later, will train naval forces in 11 countries during a seven-month deployment.

The Gulf of Guinea has significant strategic importance because a large percentage of U.S. oil imports flow through it and U.S. officials are concerned about organized crime, and potentially terrorism, in the region.

At his first Pentagon news conference since taking command of the new U.S. Africa Command, General William Ward said this is the kind of thing his command will do more of in the future.

"It provides a good example of what the newly established U.S. Africa Command is about as it relates to helping our partner nations on the continent of Africa build their capacity to better govern their spaces, to have more effect in providing for the security of their people, as well as doing the things that are important in assuring the development of the continent in ways that promote increased globalization of their economies as well as the development of their societies for the betterment of their people," said the general.

General Ward says Africa Command will do the same type of training and humanitarian assistance missions the U.S. military has pursued in Africa for years, but will do more and will have better coordination with other U.S. government agencies, humanitarian groups and African governments.

He says such missions should help dispel concerns expressed in many African countries about alleged plans establish U.S. bases on the continent and to 'militarize' U.S. Africa policy.

"Once the command begins to operate, they will see that this hype of establishing large bases is just not a reality," said General Ward.

The general also says the question of where to put the headquarters for Africa Command may not be settled for some time. He says he has not yet begun consultations with governments in the region, and needs to determine how large a headquarters he needs and where he wants to put it.

But he hopes confusion and concern about the location and role of Africa Command will be reduced now that he is in charge.

"Now there is one voice speaking for what the command is and what it is not," said the general. "That's my voice. And as I go around talking to leaders of the various countries explaining the intent the purpose that the command has for its mission, I think it will become much clearer."

The commander of U.S. Navy forces in Europe, who is responsible for the Africa Partnership Station mission, says even with Africa Command not yet fully operational, the navy is moving from what he called



General William Ward, 15 Oct 2007

'episodic' involvement on the continent to a nearly constant presence, in response to requests from African countries.

But in a VOA interview, Admiral Harry Ulrich said the goal is not to build large navies in Africa, but rather to help those countries control the part of their territory that is on the sea.

"When you say 'military capability,' it conjures up [the idea that] they're going to have navies out there doing naval warfare," he said. "That's exactly what we're not doing. We're talking about maritime security forces that are able to see out into their exclusive economic zone, that are able to sort out who's doing things legally and illegally, and they have the capacity to enforce their own laws and international laws. That's what we're talking about."

Admiral Ulrich, who works for U.S. European Command, says having a new command focused on Africa will help provide the resources and high-level focus needed to sustain the U.S. military effort to engage with African militaries.



Commander of U.S. Naval Forces Europe, Adm. Harry Ulrich, 15 Oct 2007

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