

# Special Operations a Valuable Tool In Dealing With Bloody African Conflicts

May 2014

By Dan Parsons

In 2000, as brutal rebel groups threatened to swarm the Sierra Leone capital of Freetown, just a few hundred British special forces troops threw them back into the jungle, effectively ending a decade-long civil war.

Operation Palliser, as it was called, is cited as an ideal example of the larger impacts a relatively small unit of highly trained, well-equipped special operations forces can have. While such operations are not always so successful, U.S. Special Forces Command will likely be performing similar missions in Africa in future years, experts agreed.

After leaving Afghanistan in 2014, the U.S. military has prioritized the Asia-Pacific region as a strategic venue for ship and troop deployments. But power vacuums created by the Arab Spring have made Africa an incubator for extremist groups related to al-Qaida. When Brig. Gen. James Linder assumed in 2013 command of U.S. Special Operations Command Africa, he warned leaders to keep an eye on that continent.

“To leave the continent unattended, to not work alongside our African partners to empower them to manage their security challenges, would leave them vulnerable as a safe haven and a breeding ground for a brutal enemy that’s global in scope, ruthless in purpose and insidious in method,” he said.

Deploying small numbers of specially trained troops, namely Army Special Operations Forces that are well versed in supporting indigenous troops, can pay dividends, said Michael D. Lumpkin, assistant secretary of defense for special operations and low-intensity conflict.

“We have the same opportunities before us now in Africa and parts of the Middle East,” Lumpkin testified March 11 before the Senate Armed Services Committee’s emerging threats and capabilities subcommittee. “As we did in Colombia and the Philippines, we must be willing to accept the risk of placing small numbers of specially trained forces forward to develop the trust of our partner forces and enable them over the long term to adequately deal with violent extremists and terrorists that threaten

our mutual security goals.”

Many Special Forces troops are trained to work in small groups in support of larger indigenous forces. The foreign internal defense mission, or FID, is the Army Special Forces’ bread and butter, said a Green Beret who wished to remain anonymous.

“We don’t really have to change our training to conduct FID operations, because that’s what we’ve been trained to do all along,” he told National Defense. “The important part of FID is that it gives us access to the operational environment. Therefore we can practice our language skills and become accustomed to working in the environment to which we are assigned. For other units, be they SOF or conventional, it is a little outside their comfort zone.”

A 12-man team can recruit a brigade-level unit of indigenous troops to turn the tide of regional conflicts, said Tim Brown, senior fellow at Globalsecurity.org.

Lumpkin said such a “relatively small investment” in personnel and equipment can be tailored to U.S. and regional strategic needs.

“Our logistical, intelligence and, when required, operational support to the French and African partners in the Sahel, has been critical in stemming the tide of violent extremism in Mali,” he said.

EJ Hogendoorn, deputy director for Africa at the International Crisis Group, a non-governmental organization that seeks to prevent deadly conflict, said SOF should be considered a tool to achieve strategic goals in places like Africa.

“While we have these forces available, let’s put them to good use,” Hogendoorn said. “There is a perception that Special Forces are able to assist local efforts to achieve military goals.”

Highly capable forces with specialized equipment are able to put enormous effort into ferreting out warlords or destabilizing extremist groups like al-Shabaab, an al-Qaida-linked organization based in Somalia, he added.

“I very much see special operations as a tool. They are not going to come up with a plan to fix Somalia or Libya,” Hogendoorn said. “They are best used as part of a greater strategy to achieve some kind of national objective. Special forces are put in the role of the sharp end where they are able to provide a force-multiplying effect for local forces. Oftentimes they have been able to do that well.”

Navy SEALs did just that in March when they boarded and recaptured a Libyan oil tanker that had been commandeered by pirates. The vessel “Morning Glory” had been seized by armed hijackers while transporting oil owned by the Libyan government. No one was hurt during the SEAL raid, and the ship and its cargo were returned to Libyan authorities.

The U.S.-led NATO incursion of the Libyan civil war two years earlier cost around \$1 billion. Even that largely airborne operation — undertaken primarily by European militaries — cost what U.S. taxpayers spend every four days in Afghanistan, said Ben Friedman, research fellow in defense and homeland security studies at the Cato Institute. Friedman debated other scholars at a Cato-hosted forum over whether the Libyan incursion was successful.

While it allowed the rebel forces to find and kill Muammar Gaddafi, U.S. and European assistance in the form of jet fighters and armed drones lengthened the conflict, countered Alan Kuperman, the Jennings Randolph senior fellow at the U.S. Institute for Peace. Rather than a six-week conflict during which Gaddafi likely would have defeated the rebels with around 1,000 casualties, the war stretched to 36 weeks and claimed as many as 11,000 lives, he said.

Christopher Chivvis, senior political scientist at Rand Corp., said the decision to use a handful of aircraft and no ground troops left Libya generally better off than it had been under a totalitarian regime — and at little cost to the United States.

U.S. officials want especially to avoid lengthy, costly nation-building endeavors that were the main goal of American involvement in Africa in the 1990s, Hogendoorn said. The U.S. military incursion in Somalia 20 years ago resulted in the Battle of Mogadishu, in which 18 American troops were killed and another 73 wounded when two helicopters were shot down in the city. The incident still looms as a lesson of what not to do in the region, he said.

“Black Hawk Down is still very, very relevant and is the reason we don’t have larger numbers of troops on the ground in Somalia,” Hogendoorn said. “It is why we primarily have Special Forces instead of conventional troops there now. They are able to operate more safely in these kinds of environments.”

The forward-looking Quadrennial Defense Review published in February formalizes the role the U.S. military will play in Africa. It specifies that the United States will “continue to advise, train and equip partner forces to perform essential tasks against terrorist networks, complementing U.S. activities in the field. Operations and activities in the Maghreb, Sahel and Horn of Africa, for example, further our national security interests without a large commitment of U.S. forces.”

The U.S. military will focus on building partnerships on the African continent in an effort to stabilize certain regions, but engagements will be “even more tailored and selective,” the QDR states. The document recognizes the ongoing political changes in North Africa as a result of the Arab Spring and that terrorists are seeking to exploit the power vacuums there.

“In Africa, terrorists, criminal organizations, militias, corrupt officials and pirates continue to exploit ungoverned and under-governed territory on the continent and its surrounding waters,” the QDR states. “The potential for rapidly developing threats, particularly in fragile states, including violent public protests and terrorist attacks, could pose acute challenges to U.S. interests. At the same time, there is also significant opportunity to develop stronger governance institutions and to help build professional,

capable military forces that can partner with the United States to address the full spectrum of regional security challenges.”

That strategy is on display with the Obama administration’s assistance in the search for Joseph Kony, the murderous leader of the Lord’s Resistance Army who since the 1990s has raped and pillaged a swath of central Africa the size of California. A deployment of 100 U.S. Special Forces was sent in 2011 to Uganda to help African troops find Kony within the four-nation area where he and the LRA are thought to be hiding. It was announced in March that another 200 troops and at least two CV-22 Ospreys would join the effort.

“Just by having the search, they force him to run around ... and be in defensive mode, creating such mayhem that he can’t conduct operations,” Brown said. “It’s not in our vital U.S. national interest, but it’s the butterfly effect.”

Because Kony is a non-state actor and generally regarded as a villain, Special Forces troops can earn the United States the goodwill of regional partners by working to find and capture or kill him, Brown said.

“We can do something about Kony. We don’t need ... NATO’s help,” he said. “We’ll help them but we don’t want to do a lot of the heavy lifting. He’s also not [the leader of] a sovereign state, so we can send guys in there to take him down if necessary.”

Still, most of the Special Forces deployments to Africa are done in the context of terrorism, Hogendoorn said. While it is agreed that al-Shabaab or al-Qaida in the Islamic Magreb do not represent a direct threat to the homeland, pressure applied by U.S. and allied special forces will disallow them from conjuring potentially devastating attacks, he said.

“Unless there is pressure put on these people, they could create those pockets where extremists are able to train, recruit and plan larger-scale attacks ... like what happened in Afghanistan,” Hogendoorn said.

Brown, of Globalsecurity, said the goal of Special Forces deployments should be to locate and defeat extremists before they can organize.

“Why fight these guys at the one-yard line when they are minutes away from hitting the towers?” he said. “Why not fight them on their own one-yard line by putting so much pressure on them that they can’t think straight?”

That strategy has worked in effectively disintegrating the al-Qaida that was responsible for 9/11, he said. The “most dangerous job in the world” is being the third in command of al-Qaida because of the proficiency with which U.S. drones and operatives are able to locate and kill the person currently holding that position, Brown said.

“Al-Qaida is no longer an effective organization,” he said. “It is only an idea now.”

Killing extremists before they can strike and otherwise keeping violent groups on their heels is a valid short-term strategy in the global war on terror, Hogendoorn said. But Special Forces are a means to a larger strategic end. Night raids and drone strikes will not produce any sort of lasting solution to larger problems in Africa like unstable governance, corruption and poverty, he said.

“Keeping terrorists on their back foot is a valid strategic goal. It does keep these groups from becoming more of a threat,” Hogendoorn said. “But that’s not enough. Is it a bad thing? No. Is it ultimately going to resolve the overarching issues? Also, no.”