Interview with SOFLE Team, USEMB Cotonou, March 10, 2025

**DOD/EMB coordination**

Strong importance in letting us know before hand when higher echelon personnel visit the embassy. For example, we have gotten “pop-in” visits on only three days notice who come to do assessments. Folks who are “good idea fairies.” There was a plan for someone to come in who would do intel integration. “Who is he, what does he know?” Also a perception that Benin is too low capacity to have an intel integrator so the offer seemed to not be relevant to the needs of the country.

DOD thinks they are the big dog but this is a State Department house. Can’t come swashbuckling in (Todd’s words).

Many of the key players here are non-traditional to DoD: African bureau, USAID, reps addressing Global Fragility Index.

**Hard landing case study of comms**

APRC, hard landing, there was no release of information. Weare here in the open and political reality of what we do. More they can communicate and coordinate messages across dod would be helpful. The PA was up until midnight trying to coordinate messages with AFRICOM. There is only so much we can do to go up three echelons for coordination. Only through relationships with Amanda (not sure who this is).

**Coordination with commands**

Needs to be a narrative that is pushed in coordinated fashion through dos and dod.

Country coordination meeting last week. Instead of General Langly a four star (L4) they sent a 1 star (J5 Deputy) to link up with a local three star commander. Would be good to send equivalent rank but there was recognition in the room that L4 can’t spare a week to come a visit with Benin.

There is a disconnect in understanding local culture in mil to mil engagements.

Africom has a lot of money.

All I see is millions spent on engagement in Africa. But benin what were their engagements? I don’t know what money is used for. Could be spreadsheets but when comes to the ground, to keep our presence we need more advocacy.

Niger, Chad. Ppl on the ground knew that the Niger, Mali and BF would turn to a military coup but senior leaders did not know. (so information has to move up the chain).

We saw it at CCM, country coordination meeting. They ask the Benin if you want to build up their air force but that is not realistic. They only have several air craft. Higher command needs more realism of the local capabilities and how to support those capabilities.

**Other comments**

**Capacity building requirements are very basic**

The Benin military is operating at a very basic level. Africom hired “Stop the bleed” to come in and do first aid medical training but the training was far too advanced. They thought they would come in and do TCCC (Tactical Combat Casualty Care) but instead it was more how to apply bandages and maybe learn how to use their belt as a tourniquet. “The U.S. thinks that Benin is up there but really they are down here.”

**SOF Footprint in country**

Footprint in Benin: three man CA team, a PSYOP team, an SF ODA, CFT SOFLE (Cross functional team). All from the Parakou working with Benin army. Very ct focused. My job is to ensure transparency level to country team and synchronize effects with the embassy.

In Abidjan there is an AOB, they will get contact information for us. POC there is John Johnson. The SOTF is based out of Germany bc they were expelled from Chad.

CA-Last team here, they did decent coordination between ca personnel and ca teams in Benin, Togo (2 CA personnel), Ghana, and Cotd where there is a SOF CA and reserve CA team.

**Counter Russia/china.**

Big issue we face, we work under CT Exord. Soley under CT exord; we can’t reach across to Russia, can’t do anything for Russia.

We don’t have resources to go against Russia and China. And it would be very sensitive to involve an ODA and PSYOP team to go against Russia/china. “It is not a good look.” And to do this it would have to non-attribution psyop but that entails increased risk.

If they want to counter Russia or china then that needs to be delegated and authorities provided. There is so much gold in what Russia is doing. War crimes. Call it out. Show it to ppl. Publicize it. Use platforms to push this to whatsapp groups.

Our mist is 2pax. We along are not going after this. SOCAF has authorities but shiny object is Libya. They could create anti-Russian content and push to all of Africa.

China – focus on illegal fishing, resource gathering. Harder sell in benin though bcd the population is supportive of china.

Who does regional messaging? SOTF or AOB. SOTF is in Stuttgart. Aob is local, based in Abidjan. SOTF commander is COL Ballestaros.

**Connecting CA across the region (CA storyboards not effective)**

Trying to connect CA across the region. Want to create cross talk between everyone. Togo has more Russian influence. The CA team is focusing north, where the terror threat is and they want to support villages in the north but also try to move south to exert more broader influence.

Does CA publicize its efforts? No avenue to publicize but sometimes we do get publicity from the embassy. We have team of four with one dude who can take pictures. They put together a storyboard after events but the PD team says they don’t know how to work with storyboards. You can’t share a story board on social media, it is too many pictures and words crammed on a slide.

**Challenges with COMMs**

Dos and Dod have different structures. Medicap in November in Atacora. They put a PAO training event on, combat camera came to cover. 1400 people were seen and treated in the medcap. They got great pictures and did a high five after the event and sent journalists to cover the event. But USG did not get credit. It was just white people helping. It also got only a minute long segment on national media. It was a great interview but it died on Youtube. By the time SOCAF publicized it on twitter the moment was lost.

Todd: Can you put ads out on social media? To do this we need a psyop series. But there are a lot of constraints.

In either the same or different example, the team wanted to got approval for a product but they had to go to their own source for a printer instead of being able to get stuff more professionally printed. To do a t-shirt or advertisements, all require Africom engagement and that would take months.

Want to be able to review the order offering the series (I forget the official document) but it is based on TS and they don’t have ts facilities to review and there are no dod jwics platforms in the area for them to review. They were able to get a snapshot of a page or two but the document is 20 pages long and they need to review in order to have better understanding of what is permitted.

So many opportunities to engage on but coordination above echelon takes time. Copuld jump on a call to SOCAF but the SOTF would not like this. We have advocates who advocate to SOTF but that is not enough.

**Boildown: Information and authorities for series are held at such a high level classification it is ineffective. Creates an information vaccum that adversaries fill which undercuts USG narrative.**

TV is great but need to be on radio. We would love to contract with a radio stateion.

Now they doing a huge program, doing engagements, assessments, working with local leaders and identify money to ngo to support. Local journalists reported on it but that stuck at the town level. If they partnered with the embassy than the embassy could put content out on facebook but the embassy does not have enough staff to support this.

We would like to contract with state media to push out messages. Can contract with them and have paraton do the contract. But when it comes to FAB we want to amplify messages. But it is not getting out because concerns about aligning with France. (????)

**Limited comms from FAB**

There are journalists in the north who do reporting but three out of four times the FAB won’t say anything.

Partnered with ACM for CA (?)

Had several meetings with fab, they don’t want anything operational covered.

We need chief of defense approval to talk about what ACM is doing. How? Action memos. I talk to col Ding, security cooperation talks with FAB. He says we don’t like to talk about such things. He directs to PA chief but the PA chief is not helpful. Need Senior leader engagement with FAB. Need senior leader engagement to disseminate talking point that more freedom of dissemination would be good for the fab.

There is appetite in the PAO here for more training for the fab. They requested OSINT training, requested PA training. Todd describes setaf effort to train PA and they said they would really like this. Also described AFRICOM’s effort to work with NDU to train osint and they were like we never new.

Democracy is backsliding. Notion that US requires democracy gets in the way. There is a risk that northwest Africa could fall. Political reality with election coming that more discussion of jailing journalists. If we want force projection, need to recognize that they need to have their own sovereignty here.

CT focus… first terror attack in 2020, after that is when benin started focusing on ct.

This is 1st MIST team that is here for 6 months. You can’t fire from the hip, it takes 1.5 months for the team to acclimate and understand the local area.

When we communicate our problems to higher echelon they have their own opinion. Trying to communicate challenges here but there is a huge communication gap. This could be nimble, it is a small embassy.

There is lack of clarity on permissions. Will ambassador take risks to put information out? The AOB does not want to take risks and get (in todd’s words) shot in the face by the command.

PD should work with influencers.

Spirt of America. They have MOU with dod so they can fund projects. But then this is not a dod program.

Realism of capabilities are and how to support.