Interview with USEMB Benin modified country team, March 10, 2025

Meeting with DCM

* Working group, USA … FMI is targeting host governments but it undermines US as an allie so it undermines the US too. 2024 fake African memo purported from DOD and fake French memo as well. Its purpose is to drive a wedge between the US and allies. Africa stream, memo created in Mali/Chad and made its way here.

**Assessment of security**

* Increased positive perceptions of Russian military contractors. It is bleeding down but it is more persuasive in the north.
* The pace of attacks has increased recently.

**Crash Landing of Helicopter (case study of poor Africom comms)**

Hard landing of crash. Africom chartered copter for medical evacuation. Video of the helicopter landing surfaced. Russia most certainly behind it.

* + Mist: hard landing incident. Implications of the crash. SOCAF PA helped to coordinate verbiage of press release but because it is an Africom platformit needed Africom support.
  + So socaf defensive support to Africa is a consistent problem. Very visible platform. Very public. So thought Africom would be willing to talk. You need to say something and it took time for the usemb to coordinate the message with AFRICOM. Africom was recalcitrate (todd: not tracking this)
    - 7 hours and it was teeth pulling to get a response but when it did come out it helped diffuse concerns “but before French mercenaries” (help)

**Terrorism attack in north (case study of poor communications)**

* + Trying to get Benin government do do anything is challenging. Usg can’t take responsibility. January 8 deadly attack that killed 35 benin soldiers. Benin never released a statement. Eventually they issued condolensces but it was not enough. Why? Government is very focused on success. They see it as a threat to their economic objectives and goal to create image of a safe benin for tourism and that people are welcomed here. They don’t wnt to do anything to conflict with this. It irks them that google lists it as a terror state.
  + Terror attack took place during voodoo festival so the timing was very significant.
  + Also lasting multilateral platform for caribean. Communication is perceived as weakness.

**Benin government communications**

Rampant misinformation and speculation. There was an information void and Benin does not like to talk about it.

* Frequent topic of conversation is AES because a major pint is upcoming election. Nothing in the information space. President not running a third term but there is no other candidate (he is not allowing another candidate). But once candidates are identified then they can be exploited.
* Other piece… electoral code… there is the trapping of democracy but gives government total control
* No censorship in benin but government will come after you if you post something they don’t like.
* There is an information gap here that is filled with misinformation. For example, last year military exercizes were taking place close to a park and in the middle of the day. People panicked and thought they were under attack but the government did not communicate. The vacuume creates risk of communication.

As transition approaches, more of an effort to manipulate

* EU donated airplane; population angry at EU for this; We have a longer history of cooperation in benin so ire is not directed at the US

**Counter FIMI**

* Post has limited capacity to monitor FIMI. With GEC dissolution everything came to a halt. There is only one confirmed official for the GEC
* Embassy is trying to assess China’s moves in the country.
* AES narrative: Government propped up by evil friend, colonizers
* China: Cultural influence, they bring in a ship and it gets positive coverage. They shake hands and eat shrimp.
* Russia messages are at lower level and goal to pressure government
* The difference between Russia and china is one of top down (China) vs. bottom up messaging (Russia). Russia propaganda is more effective. Benin is not a natural ally to China as there is no natural resources here to exploit. The government isbuying a damn or road (though heard later that china helping to build a road). And benin, which is fiscally conservative is not going into debt from china or taking out their loans. The benin government is proud of of how they balanced their books but they are not alleviating poverty.
* The north has more poverty than the south, which is relatively rich by comparison. Here you can see cranes and other forms of construction. So there is a north-south divide.
* Localized conflicts are getting coopted. There are farmer – herder conflicts. Farmers are blaming the herders for ruining crops. By

**Programs**

* Literal Regional Initiative (LRI), had been up since 2022. Now it is on pause.
* They are not doing a ton on mis/dis but attempting to fill the information gap.
* Conflict sensitive communication techniques. When conflict kicked off mayors didn’t know how to talk about it. So they had folks from Niger talk to them (is this right?)
* Mis and disinformation: fact checking, identify how youth can identify disinformation by encouraging youth to fact check. (Paul, can you confirm this was an embassy program)
* There is no large company in benin that monitors social media. In ghan yes but not in benin. Looking regionally but they have not funded anything.
* Coastal state stability. Ghana and coastal countries. It was a USAID program based out of accra that sought to strengthen resiliency. Called SRPS. But it is a small effort, only $800,000. Talk to Ina/Katrina?
* Todd asks about embassy social media monitoring. There is an open source office in the bureau but they are focused on identifying threats to secretary, not focused on embassy needs.
* While a lot of open source information sources in benin it is whatsapp. Facebook is mostly for elites. People who can’t read use voice mssages on whatsapp. Public facebook posts don’t make in. people love diversity visa program. The embassy also can’t monitor or use tiktok.
* Global fragility act. Money congressionally mandated. Money is still alive. It is 135million for coastal west Africa. (also said, west Africa gets $61million. ). Money is difficult to turn off because it is co-done with the host governments. For benin it will be 13million of which 7 million will come from usaid. But it will need to reprogram for the new administration. Benin does not want to be considered a fragile state but they are.
* Our activities. One big one is Northern Econ Livelihood for Youth, a USAID program, I think Dexus international is the implementer.
* The rest is focused on elections, one for mis and disinformation. We gave $500k to the GEC but now that money needs to be reprogrammed.
* USAID is offline here . The websites are gone, the data is gone and if new money comnes in then there are major questions as to how it will be managed. There are not staff here to manage it and can’t manage from the states.

**Military comms improving**

* But traction with local leaders. Military leaders. A lot of progress since 2022 to share information.
* It goes both ways. Communities share information but they need reverse sharing.
* When there are attacks it sometimes takes days to make notifications. Recently comms took place in one hour (paul?)
* PA chief provided statement to Reuters but parts of it were inaccurate. He minimized the number of casualties saying there were 6 and not 36 casualties and he inflated the number of enemy KIA.
* November, held an event where journalists trained military Pao. SETAF sent a combat camera. They did the training from scratch, going so far as to have to teach them how to take a photograph.
* Army PA now working to change selection for PAO personnel to choose more social individuals who want to be PA rather than infantry types. They are also working to increase the number of PAOs. From 2 to 30. The new recruits want to report on whatsapp but the command is reluctant.
* The Benin military also wants to do more with information operations but the defense chief has been resistant.

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* Something about the Belgians… “not very effective”