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U.S. expands secret intelligence operations in Africa

By Craig Whitlock, Published: June 13

OUAGADOUGOU, Burkina Faso — The U.S. military is expanding its secret intelligence operations across Africa, establishing a network of small air bases to spy on terrorist hideouts from the fringes of the Sahara to jungle terrain along the equator, according to documents and people involved in the project.

At the heart of the surveillance operations are small, unarmed turboprop aircraft disguised as private planes. Equipped with hidden sensors that can record full-motion video, track infrared heat patterns, and vacuum up radio and cellphone signals, the planes refuel on isolated airstrips favored by African bush pilots, extending their effective flight range by thousands of miles.

About a dozen air bases have been established in Africa since 2007, according to a former senior U.S. commander involved in setting up the network. Most are small operations run out of secluded hangars at African military bases or civilian airports.

The nature and extent of the missions, as well as many of the bases being used, have not been previously reported but are partially documented in public Defense Department contracts. The operations have intensified in recent months, part of a growing shadow war against al-Qaeda affiliates and other militant groups. The surveillance is overseen by U.S. Special Operations forces but relies heavily on private military contractors and support from African troops.

The surveillance underscores how Special Operations forces, which have played an outsize role in the Obama administration's national security strategy, are working clandestinely all over the globe, not just in war zones. The lightly equipped commando units train foreign security forces and perform aid missions, but they also include teams dedicated to tracking and killing terrorism suspects.

The establishment of the Africa missions also highlights the ways in which Special Operations forces are blurring the lines that govern the secret world of intelligence, moving aggressively into spheres once reserved for the CIA. The CIA has expanded its counterterrorism and intelligence-gathering operations in Africa, but its manpower and resources pale in comparison with those of the military.

U.S. officials said the African surveillance operations are necessary to track terrorist groups that have taken root in failed states on the continent and threaten to destabilize neighboring countries.

A hub for secret network

A key hub of the U.S. spying network can be found in Ouagadougou (WAH-gah-DOO-goo), the flat, sunbaked capital of Burkina Faso, one of the most impoverished countries in Africa.

Under a classified surveillance program code-named Creek Sand, dozens of U.S. personnel and contractors have come to Ouagadougou in recent years to establish a small air base on the military side of the international airport.

The unarmed U.S. spy planes fly hundreds of miles north to Mali, Mauritania and the Sahara, where they search for fighters from al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, a regional network that kidnaps Westerners for ransom.

The surveillance flights have taken on added importance in the turbulent aftermath of a March coup in Mali, which has enabled al-Qaeda sympathizers to declare an independent Islamist state in the northern half of the country.

Elsewhere, commanders have said they are increasingly worried about the spread of Boko Haram, an Islamist group in Nigeria blamed for a rash of bombings there. U.S. forces are orchestrating a regional intervention in Somalia to target al-Shabab, another al-Qaeda affiliate. In Central Africa, about 100 American Special Operations troops are helping to coordinate the hunt for Joseph Kony, the Ugandan leader of a brutal guerrilla group known as the Lord's Resistance Army.

The results of the American surveillance missions are shrouded in secrecy. Although the U.S. military has launched airstrikes and raids in Somalia, commanders said that in other places, they generally limit their involvement to sharing intelligence with allied African forces so they can attack terrorist camps on their own territory.

The creeping U.S. military involvement in long-simmering African conflicts, however, carries risks. Some State Department officials have expressed reservations about the militarization of U.S. foreign policy on the continent. They have argued that most terrorist cells in Africa are pursuing local aims, not global ones, and do not present a direct threat to the United States.

The potential for creating a popular backlash can be seen across the Red Sea, where an escalating campaign of U.S. drone strikes in Yemen is angering tribesmen and generating sympathy for an al-Qaeda franchise there.

In a response to written questions from The Washington Post, the U.S. Africa Command said that it would not comment on "specific operational details."

"We do, however, work closely with our African partners to facilitate access, when required, to conduct missions or operations that support and further our mutual security goals," the command said.

Surveillance and intelligence-gathering operations, it added, are "simply a tool we employ to enable host nation militaries to better understand the threat picture."

Uncovering the details

The U.S. military has largely kept details of its spy flights in Africa secret. The Post pieced together descriptions of the surveillance network by examining references to it in unclassified military reports, U.S. government contracting documents and diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks, the anti-secrecy group.

Further details were provided by interviews with American and African officials, as well as military contractors.

In addition to Burkina Faso, U.S. surveillance planes have operated periodically out of nearby Mauritania. In Central Africa, the main hub is in Uganda, though there are plans to open a base in South Sudan. In East Africa, U.S. aircraft fly out of bases in Ethiopia, Djibouti, Kenya and the Indian Ocean archipelago of the Seychelles.

Army Gen. Carter F. Ham, the head of U.S. Africa Command, which is responsible for military operations on the continent, hinted at the importance and extent of the air bases while testifying before Congress in March. Without divulging locations, he made clear that, in Africa, he wanted to expand "ISR," the military's acronym for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance.

"Without operating locations on the continent, ISR capabilities would be curtailed, potentially endangering U.S. security," Ham said in a statement submitted to the House Armed Services Committee. "Given the vast geographic space and diversity in threats, the command requires increased ISR assets to adequately address the security challenges on the continent."

Some of the U.S. air bases, including ones in Djibouti, Ethiopia and the Seychelles, fly Predator and Reaper drones, the original and upgraded models, respectively, of the remotely piloted aircraft that the Obama administration has used to kill al-Qaeda leaders in Pakistan and Yemen.

"We don't have remotely piloted aircraft in many places other than East Africa, but we could," said a senior U.S. military official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss intelligence matters. "If there was a need to do so and those assets were available, I'm certain we could get the access and the overflight [permission] that is necessary to do that."

Common aircraft

Most of the spy flights in Africa, however, take off the old-fashioned way — with pilots in the cockpit. The conventional aircraft hold two big advantages over drones: They are cheaper to operate and far less likely to draw attention because they are so similar to the planes used throughout Africa.

The bulk of the U.S. surveillance fleet is composed of single-engine Pilatus PC-12s, small passenger and cargo utility planes manufactured in Switzerland. The aircraft are not equipped with weapons. They often do not bear military markings or government insignia.

The Pentagon began acquiring the planes in 2005 to fly commandos into territory where the military wanted to maintain a clandestine presence. The Air Force variant of the aircraft is known as the U-28A. The Air Force Special Operations Command has about 21 of the planes in its inventory.

In February, a U-28A crashed as it was returning to Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti, the only permanent U.S. military base in Africa. Four airmen from the Air Force Special Operations Command were killed. It was the first reported fatal incident involving a U-28A since the military began deploying the aircraft six years ago.

Air Force officials said that the crash was an accident and that they are investigating the cause. Military officials declined to answer questions about the flight's mission.

Because of its strategic location on the Horn of Africa, Camp Lemonnier is a hub for spy flights in the

region. It is about 500 miles from southern Somalia, an area largely controlled by the al-Shabab militia. Lemonnier is even closer — less than 100 miles — to Yemen, where another al-Qaeda franchise has expanded its influence and plotted attacks against the United States.

Elsewhere in Africa, the U.S. military is relying on private contractors to provide and operate PC-12 spy planes in the search for Kony, the fugitive leader of the Lord's Resistance Army, a group known for mutilating victims, committing mass rape and enslaving children as soldiers.

Ham, the Africa Command chief, said in his testimony to Congress in March that he was seeking to establish a base for surveillance flights in Nzara, South Sudan. Although that would bolster the hunt for Kony, who is wanted by the International Criminal Court, it would also enable the U.S. military to keep an eye on the worsening conflict between Sudan and South Sudan. The two countries fought a civil war for more than two decades and are on the verge of war again, in part over potentially rich oil deposits valued by foreign investors.

Other aviation projects are in the offing. An engineering battalion of Navy Seabees has been assigned to complete a $10 million runway upgrade this summer at the Manda Bay Naval Base, a Kenyan military installation on the Indian Ocean. An Africa Command spokeswoman said the runway extension is necessary so American C-130 troop transport flights can land at night and during bad weather.

About 120 U.S. military personnel and contractors are stationed at Manda Bay, which Navy SEALs and other commandos have used as a base from which to conduct raids against Somali pirates and al-Shabab fighters.

About 6,000 miles to the west, the Pentagon is spending $8.1 million to upgrade a forward operating base and airstrip in Mauritania, on the western edge of the Sahara. The base is near the border with strife-torn Mali.

The Defense Department also set aside $22.6 million in July to buy a Pilatus PC-6 aircraft and another turboprop plane so U.S.-trained Mauritanian security forces can conduct rudimentary surveillance operations, according to documents submitted to Congress.

Crowding the embassy

The U.S. military began building its presence in Burkina Faso in 2007, when it signed a deal that enabled the Pentagon to establish a Joint Special Operations Air Detachment in Ouagadougou. At the time, the U.S. military said the arrangement would support "medical evacuation and logistics requirements" but provided no other details.

By the end of 2009, about 65 U.S. military personnel and contractors were working in Burkina Faso, more than in all but three other African countries, according to a U.S. Embassy cable from Ouagadougou. In the cable, diplomats complained to the State Department that the onslaught of U.S. troops and support staff had "completely overwhelmed" the embassy.

In addition to Pilatus PC-12 flights for Creek Sand, the U.S. military personnel in Ouagadougou ran a regional intelligence "fusion cell" code-named Aztec Archer, according to the cable.

Burkina Faso, a predominantly Muslim country whose name means "the land of upright men," does not have a history of radicalism. U.S. military officials saw it as an attractive base because of its strategic location bordering the Sahel, the arid region south of the Sahara where al-Qaeda's North African

affiliate is active.

Unlike many other governments in the region, the one in Burkina Faso was relatively stable. The U.S. military operated Creek Sand spy flights from Nouakchott, Mauritania, until 2008, when a military coup forced Washington to suspend relations and end the surveillance, according to former U.S. officials and diplomatic cables.

In Ouagadougou, both sides have worked hard to keep the partnership quiet. In a July 2009 meeting, Yero Boly, the defense minister of Burkina Faso, told a U.S. Embassy official that he was pleased with the results. But he confessed he was nervous that the unmarked American planes might draw "undue attention" at the airport in the heart of the capital and suggested that they move to a more secluded hangar.

"According to Boly, the present location of the aircraft was in retrospect not an ideal choice in that it put the U.S. aircraft in a section of the airfield that already had too much traffic," according to a diplomatic cable summarizing the meeting. "He also commented that U.S. personnel were extremely discreet."

U.S. officials raised the possibility of basing the planes about 220 miles to the west, in the city of Bobo Dioulasso, according to the cable. Boly said that the Americans could use that airport on a "short term or emergency basis" but that a U.S. presence there "would likely draw greater attention."

In an interview with The Post, Djibril Bassole, the foreign minister of Burkina Faso, praised security relations between his country and the United States, saying they were crucial to containing al-Qaeda forces in the region.

"We need to fight and protect our borders," he said. "Once they infiltrate your country, it's very, very difficult to get them out."

Bassole declined, however, to answer questions about the activities of U.S. Special Operations forces in his country.

"I cannot provide details, but it has been very, very helpful," he said. "This cooperation should be very, very discreet. We should not show to al-Qaeda that we are now working with the Americans."

Discretion is not always strictly observed. In interviews last month, residents of Ouagadougou said American service members and contractors stand out, even in plainclothes, and are appreciated for the steady business they bring to bars and a pizzeria in the city center.

In April 2010, one American, in particular, drew attention. A U.S. contractor who had been assigned to support the surveillance missions in Ouagadougou was flying home from Africa on leave when he announced that he had been "in Ouaga illegally" and was carrying dynamite in his boots and laptop.

As the contractor, Derek Stansberry, mumbled other incoherent stories about allegedly top-secret operations, he was grabbed by U.S. air marshals aboard the Paris-to-Atlanta flight. No explosives were found, but the incident drew international attention.

Stansberry, who did not respond to a request for comment, was found not guilty by reason of temporary insanity; he said he was overstressed and had overdosed on the sleep aid Ambien.

A photograph on his Facebook page around the time of the incident showed him posing in the cockpit of

a Pilatus aircraft. The caption read: “Flying a PC-12 ain’t that hard.”