

## THE AFRICA CLEARING HOUSE

---

MARTIN PLAUT<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

On May 24 – 25<sup>th</sup> 2004 senior officers from Europe, the United States and Canada met at Senningen Chateau in Luxembourg for the first meeting of what was termed the ‘Africa Clearing House’. Europe was represented by Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, Ireland, Italy, Greece, Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Austria (representing the UN’s Standby High Readiness Brigade - Shirbrig). Also in attendance were representatives of Nato and the European Union. The conference, co-hosted by the U.S. and Luxembourg and took as its focus West Africa and Ecowas – the Economic Community of West African States. It is also worth noting that there was no African presence at Senningen, something that is due to be corrected at the next meeting, scheduled for December 2004.

The meeting was convened without any publicity and was concluded without a briefing to the press. The Africa Clearing House is the brainchild of the Eucom – the U.S. European Command, which covers all of Africa, except for Sudan and the Horn. It is arguably one of the most important international security initiatives relating to the African continent that is presently under way. It is certainly the least well known.

### Aim

The aim of the Africa Clearing House (ACH) was spelled out by Lt Col Phil Rogers, of the US Marine Corps at the start of the meeting. ‘Goal – To provide a multi-lateral forum to exchange information on security assistance and cooperation programs for the African continent; to establish the ACH as the premier mechanism for continued information exchange, cooperation and future collaboration.’<sup>2</sup> Colonel Rogers then went on to indicate how it was anticipated that the ACH would operate. It would meet quarterly or semi-annually; there would be a rotating host nation which would act as chair and it would be open to all interested Nato and European Union member states.

A long list of aims were then presented:

- Prevent, mitigate and resolve conflict on the continent.
- Prepare African armed forces and regional organisations for contingency operations
- Professionalise African militaries
- Increase African capacity to prevent and respond to terrorist activities
- Increase democracy, good governance and respect for the rule of law, and help strengthen civil society
- Strengthen private sector economic growth and increasing productivity through expanded trade and investment
- Counter the spread of Hiv/Aids

- Preserve West Africa's sustainable resource base, unique eco-systems.

Each of the participants then ran through a presentation of just what their nation or organisation was undertaking in Africa in general, and West Africa in particular.

The Spanish presentation was particularly graphic.<sup>3</sup> It highlights a concern that is reflected in a number of European presentations, namely the perceived threat of migration. It showed the 14 kilometres that separates the African mainland from Spain (actually showing how far Africa is from Gibraltar, but that is perhaps beside the point.) It then indicated the populations of North Africa and Europe, with large red arrows pointing northwards. Finally it presented the rising trend of illegal immigration to Spain, from around 10,000 in 1998 to over 120,000 by 2002. Migration is clearly a significant concern for all the delegations from southern Europe.

The other major focus was terrorism. Colonel Mike Anderson, the head of the US delegation, put it this way:

"Africa can no longer be regarded as a tertiary effort. It is a focus of US military policy. And it's a focus because we realise that we need to be proactive versus reactive, in terms of dealing with some of the issues that we are dealing with elsewhere in the world - terrorism, illegal immigration, arms trafficking - and the best way to do that is to be proactive in sowing the seed corn of stability and security in Africa."<sup>4</sup>

## Background

American focus on Africa has grown in recent years. The lack of interest that characterised the period immediately after the end of the Cold War is now firmly in the past. The events that are generally credited with initiating this trend were the bombing of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998, in which 224 people were killed. Since then five factors have been identified as really shaping policy towards Africa in Washington: the war on terrorism, the rising importance of African oil, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, armed conflicts

and global trade.<sup>5</sup> As the Kansteiner report argued: "...Africa has assumed a new, strategic place in U.S. foreign policy and in the definition of U.S. national interests."<sup>6</sup>

Of these factors oil is perhaps the most significant. It is estimated that by 2010 American reliance on Sub-Saharan oil will rise from the present level of 17% to approximately 25%.<sup>7</sup> US corporate investment in the Nigerian and Angolan oil industries was worth \$1.8 billion in 2003 alone.<sup>8</sup>

This increasing dependency and level of economic involvement has brought with it an increased perception of risk. This was admirably laid out in a recent report by the Washington based think-tank, the Centre for Strategic and International Studies.<sup>9</sup>

New threats and vulnerabilities are emerging in the region: (1) indigenous militant Islamic groups, concentrated in Nigeria and neighboring states, that are linked to externally supported local madrassas; (2) the migration southwards from Algeria and other North African venues of terrorist movements, most notably the Algerian Salafist Movement for Combat and Prayer, which reportedly has established training bases in Mali and Niger; (3) Lebanese trading communities, long-standing support networks for Hizballah, some of which are reportedly engaged in illicit diamond trafficking, money laundering, and the movement of lethal materiel; and (4) a rising number of conspicuous, minimally protected economic installations, especially in the energy sector, that are overtly tied to Western corporate interests. Early in 2003, Osama bin Laden publicly exhorted his followers to make Nigeria a global priority: it is a country divided along a Muslim/Christian fault line; its wealth and stability are tied intimately to Western capital and technology; and it offers multiple entry points and local partners. The U.S. European Command, mandated to reconfigure the deployment of U.S. assets to the south in Africa and eastward in Europe, has begun expanding activities in West and

Central Africa. This has taken the form of the Pan Sahel initiative, intended to build the counterterrorism capacities of Chad, Niger, Mali, and Mauritania through training and the provision of equipment. A number of other access agreements have been concluded (Ghana, Senegal, Gabon, Algeria, and Morocco) or are under discussion (Angola, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Nigeria). There is also active consideration of expanding assistance to strengthen the coast guards of energy-rich states whose maritime security is weak.

Since that passage was written only one factor has really changed. The commitment to Africa has increased. The Pan Sahel initiative has had its area of operation expanded and is now renamed the Trans Sahara Counter Terrorist Initiative. As part of this programme U.S. troops have finished training African special forces in Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Chad.<sup>10</sup>

What is clear from the above is that Africa is of increasing strategic importance to the U.S. The Africa Clearing House needs to be seen against this background: as a U.S. attempt to co-ordinate the work of Nato and Europe so as to meet commonly perceived risks posed in, for and by Africa.

These developments come at a time when Africa itself is taking its security more seriously. As Nelson Alusala demonstrated, the African Union's Peace and Security Council is now functioning and beginning to work on the formation of five regionally based standby brigades that should be ready for deployment by 2010.<sup>11</sup> This is something that is enthusiastically endorsed by the U.S. General Charles Wald, second in command of Eucom, and responsible for Africa has given it his whole-hearted support. He went on to indicate that the Ecom intervention in Liberia was very much the kind of initiative that Washington welcomed.<sup>12</sup>

It is, however, less clear is what will take place when African and American interests do not coincide. For example, in June 2003 year five Muslims living in Malawi were seized by local security forces, working with the Central Intelligence Agency. Their lawyer got an

injunction from the High Court blocking their deportation from the country. Despite this the men – from Somalia, Kenya, Saudi Arabia and Turkey – were taken from Malawi and held in Zimbabwe where they were interrogated for a month before finally being freed. The incident outraged the Muslim community of Malawi, which rioted, clashing with police. Amnesty International issued a statement complaining that: "Once again it seems that the US may have been involved in a transfer which circumvents basic human rights protections and national law".<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

The U.S. is clearly determined to pursue the war against terrorism wherever it leads. The question is to what extent it is willing to submit its legitimate security concerns to the kind of limitations that are required for satisfactory multilateral action. To what extent are its Nato allies prepared to pool resources and priorities in Africa? How many European priorities in Africa is Washington really willing to take on board? And, most importantly of all, to what extent are African concerns to be reflected in the work of the Africa Clearing House?

These are just questions at this stage, but they will have to be tackled as the project unfolds. What is clear, even at this initial stage, is that if the ACH really becomes the 'premier mechanism for continued information exchange, cooperation and future collaboration' on Africa, then it will be worth much more serious scrutiny than has been possible so far.

## Notes

- 1 Martin has written extensively on South Africa and the Horn of Africa and is co-editor (with Dominique Jacquin-Berdal) of 'Unfinished Business: the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea' Red Sea Press, (forthcoming).
- 2 All the presentations from the meeting are available on the Eucom website. <[www.eucom.mil/Directorates/ECJ4/index.htm](http://www.eucom.mil/Directorates/ECJ4/index.htm)>, <[www.eucom.mil/Directorates/ECJ5/ach.htm&2](http://www.eucom.mil/Directorates/ECJ5/ach.htm&2)>.
- 3 <[www.eucom.mil/Directorates/ECJ5/Africa-%20Clearing%20House/Briefings/Spain.ppt](http://www.eucom.mil/Directorates/ECJ5/Africa-%20Clearing%20House/Briefings/Spain.ppt)>
- 4 Telephone interview with the author.

- 5 *Rising US Stakes in Africa: Seven proposals to strengthen US – Africa Policy*, A Report of the Africa Policy Advisory Panel, chaired by Walter Kansteiner, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, May 2004, page 2.
- 6 Ibid. pp 2.
- 7 *Bottom of the barrel: Africa's oil boom and the poor*. Ian Garry and Terry Karl, Catholic Relief Services, pp 14.
- 8 *Promoting transparency in the African Oil Sector*. David Goldwyn and J. Stephen Morrison (co-chairs), Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, March 2004, pp 8.
- 9 Ibid. pp 14 – 5.
- 10 Reuters 23 September 2004
- 11 African Standby Force: East Africa Moves on. *African Security Review*, Vol 13 No 2, Institute for Security Studies (ISS), Pretoria, 2004.
- 12 Author's interview with General Wald, Camp Patch, Stuttgart, Germany, 22 March 2004.
- 13 Amnesty International press release, 25 June 2003. <[www.web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGAMR510922003?open&of=ENG-MWI](http://www.web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGAMR510922003?open&of=ENG-MWI)>.