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U.S. Cuts in Africa Aid Said to Hurt War on Terror

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WASHINGTON, July 22 — The Bush administration and Congress have slashed millions of dollars of military aid to African nations in recent years, moves that Pentagon officials and senior military commanders say have undermined American efforts to combat terrorist threats in Africa and to counter expanding Chinese influence there.

Since 2003, Washington has shut down Pentagon programs to train and equip militaries in a handful of African nations because they have declined to sign agreements exempting American troops from the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

But the policy, which was designed to protect American troops, has instead angered senior military officials, who say the cuts in military aid are shortsighted and have weakened counterterrorism efforts in places where the threat of international terrorism is said to be most acute.

Some cite this as a case where the unintended consequences of the go-it-alone approach to foreign policy that Washington took after the Sept. 11 attacks affected the larger American efforts to combat terrorism.

The cuts have also prompted outrage in Latin America, where several nations that have refused to sign the agreements have been cut off from certain military aid programs.

Last year, the United States cut off \$13 million for training and equipping troops in Kenya, where operatives of Al Qaeda killed 224 people when they bombed the American Embassy compound in Nairobi in 1998.

In 2003, the flow of \$309,000 annually was suspended to Mali, where Pentagon officials contend an Algerian separatist group with ties to Al Qaeda — known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, or G.S.P.C. — has established a base. Money has also been cut for Tanzania, Niger and several other African nations.

Citing Kenya as an example, Pentagon officials say it makes little sense to ask for Kenya's support in fighting terrorism while denying it the money it needs for training and equipping troops.

“Kenya is a key partner in our counterterrorism strategy and our goals in Africa,” a Pentagon official who works on Africa strategy said. “This hurts us, there's no question about it.”

Several officials interviewed for this article were given anonymity because they were discussing a continuing debate in the government and because some were discussing intelligence matters.

Some military officials also argue that the aid cuts have given China an upper hand in what they describe as a modern Great Game — a battle for influence in Africa between the powers, similar to the 19th-century rivalry in Central Asia between the British and the Russians.

Specifically, the officials cite the millions of dollars the Chinese government has spent on infrastructure projects and military training in Africa to help lock up government contracts for natural resources like oil, timber and metals.

“It’s hard to compete with China because of the agility they have in obtaining contracts and then starting projects very quickly without worrying too much about human rights,” Gen. James Jones of the American European Command, which has military responsibility for most of Africa, recently told a Senate panel. “So we have our work cut out for us.”

China has substantially expanded its presence in Africa in recent years. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, China’s trade with Africa doubled to \$18.5 billion between 2002 and 2003, and the figure exceeded \$32 billion in November of 2005. China has overtaken Britain to become the continent’s third most important trading partner. But it is the impact on counterterrorism efforts in Africa that most alarms military officials.

The situation in Mali is of great concern because the Salafist group is believed to have established a foothold in that desolate country’s northern region. A recent State Department report said Mali’s northern territories had turned into a “safe haven” for the group’s fighters.

The Salafist group’s ability to attack the Algerian government is believed to have diminished in recent years, but intelligence officials are now concerned that the group is expanding its ties to Al Qaeda and other groups, and has used networks in the Middle East to send fighters into Iraq.

In recent years, the Pentagon has sent Special Forces trainers into Mali as part of a broader counterterrorism initiative to strengthen the abilities of Mali’s army to deal with organizations like the Salafist group.

But counterterrorism experts see such operations as short-term solutions. They argue that without a serious investment in Mali’s army, the ramshackle military has little hope of rooting out terrorists.

“Mali doesn’t have any power production capabilities, and its military can’t extend any power up into the north,” said an American official, who recently made a fact-finding trip to the Sahara. “The terrorist organizations can run around up there because the army can’t get to them.”

Passed by Congress and signed into law by President Bush in August 2002, the American Servicemembers’ Protection Act prohibits certain types of military aid to countries that

have signed on to the International Criminal Court but have not signed a separate accord with the United States, called an Article 98 agreement.

Specifically, the law cuts off funds that provide training to military officers of friendly nations, known as IMET funds, and funds for foreign militaries to buy new weapons and equipment.

Under the terms of Article 98 agreements, which the Bush administration has pressed more than 100 nations to sign, nations pledge not to surrender American citizens to the international court without the consent of officials in Washington.

The Bush administration has refused to endorse the court, contending that overzealous prosecutors could charge American soldiers or civilian officials with war crimes for their roles in carrying out American policies abroad.

White House opposition to the court led Congress to severely restrict military and economic aid to countries that have not signed Article 98 agreements.

In March, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said blocking military assistance to nations seeking to combat terrorism was “sort of the same as shooting ourselves in the foot,” and the Pentagon’s recent Quadrennial Defense Review calls for the government to consider separating military funding from the 2002 law.

Congress is also considering a bill to repeal some of these measures. But the policy still has advocates in Washington, especially in the White House.

In Latin America, some of the countries that have lost funding have been major Pentagon partners in the effort to eradicate cocaine production. Ecuador, for instance, has been a staging ground for American surveillance planes on counternarcotics missions and has lost millions of dollars in military aid for refusing to sign an Article 98 agreement.

The cuts have drawn the ire of American military officials with responsibility for Latin America.

“Now when I go through the region, the fact is that the foreign military financing is gone,” Gen. Bantz J. Craddock of the United States Southern Command told the Senate this year. “IMET is gone.”

“Other nations are moving in,” he said. “The People’s Republic of China has made many offers.”