

Regional symposium sheds light on Africa

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Dec. 9, 2008 – Thanks to a series of experts of diverse backgrounds, Army War College students, staff and faculty learned more about the diverse continent of Africa during a two-day regional symposium in Bliss Hall Dec. 9 and 10.

"Immense progress is being made in this region. Many times the people have been let down by their senior leaders but times are changing," said retired Ambassador Johnnie Carson, National Intelligence Officer for Africa, National Intelligence Council.

Topics included the role of USAFRICOM in the region, effects of the drug trade, ethnic tensions and the status of the African Union and a question and answer session that delved deeper into the issues.

Carson gave a snapshot of the region as one that is slowly emerging from decades of poor leadership to stabilize the region.

Nigerian **Col. Ndagulu Imam**, a USAWC International Fellow, gave a first-hand opinion during the session.

"The world is following the steps to improve security in Africa," he said. "But we still need your support." Carson agreed that the military plays an important role in the region, along with international aid.

Jennifer Cooke, Africa Program director at the Center for Strategic and International Issues, discussed the status of governments in Africa, specifically those in the Congo, as well as the history of U.S. interaction in the region and how ethnic tensions are affected by economic factors.

"Resource scarcity and weak governments create a vacuum that many times lead to ethnic tensions," she said. "But the rise of the middle class and organizations of professional organizations, such as those of tea growers, help to look past ethnic issues and look at issues that affect industries as a whole."

The issue of corruption in the region was one that particularly piqued the interest of USAWC student **Jimmie Vaughn, student**.

"I knew how prevalent corruption had been in the region but this symposium really put into context for me what the U.S. role may be," said Vaughn. "The ability for DoD to work effectively with the State Department is really going to be key."

The United States Africa Command was also discussed and the commander, Gen. William Ward, spoke to the students via video teleconference on Dec. 10.

Vaughn said she felt the standup of AFRICOM would cause a shift in thinking for both the State Department and Department of Defense.

"It really is a paradigm shift for both of us," she said. "The military is used to having the lead for many of these situations. In Africa, in order to be effective, the DoD will have to assume more of a support role. Both organizations will need to be able to communicate effectively both internally and externally."

Lt. Col. Thomas Solhjem, student, said the discussion with Ward helped to validate many of the things they'd been learning about the role and responsibilities of AFRICOM.

"He really laid out for us the role of the State Department and the Department of Defense and answered any questions we had," he said. "The elements of influence are much broader. The region is much more relationship based and that will have to be the focus of our efforts."

Louis Mazel, Director Office of African Regional and Security Affairs, Department of State, focused on the developing relationship between China and Africa.

"China has recognized the value of Africa," Mazel said. "They have identified that Africa is a great market for low-cost Chinese consumer goods like TVs, pots and pans and dresses." He pointed out that 90 percent of the Chinese gross domestic product is made up of trade and Africa is China's second largest trading partner.

In the increasing global competition for energy resources, Africa plays a key role.

"One-third of the new oil discoveries have occurred in Africa," said Mazel. "Add that to the fact that Africa is a tremendous source of strategic materials like chromium, and the reasons for Chinese interest are obvious." China has built infrastructure in the continent as well, to include sports stadiums and parliament buildings, he added.

Mazel also pointed out many programs where the U.S. and China have joined together to combat issues in the region, including those for malaria treatment and prevention.

Theresa Whelan, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for African Affairs, gave the students a look at Africa from the perspective of the Secretary of Defense Office.

"Governments that cannot support themselves will pose a threat to U.S. national security," she said. "We need a security partnership with African nations to solve our common problems." Whelan also talked about the standup and progress of AFRICOM, but pointed out that security policy is only of part of the U.S. - African collaboration.

"We also focus on health issues, trade promotion, peacekeeping capacities, human rights and joint training."

Africa was chosen as the region sot study for a number of reasons.

""We are always looking ahead and trying to anticipate what may be the next areas of interest," said **Col. Tom Sheperd**, director of African studies, Department of National Security and Strategy. "The trend lines point to a greater importance of Africa to the U.S. and it has received a lot of attention from the Bush administration as indicted by the standup of AFRICOM. We chose this region because we wanted to make sure the students are exposed to a region they will probably be dealing with in the near future."