

## **US Signals Hands-On Approach to Africa**

**Author:** [Peter Eichstaedt](#)

As the presidential election race in the United States approaches the finish line, Africa-watchers are wondering how the next administration will deal with the continent.

No matter who is elected, however, strategic military changes put in place in early October will mean the US having a hands-on approach to Africa.

These changes will be magnified if the winner of the election is Democratic nominee Senator Barack Obama.

That was made abundantly clear in the October 7 nationally televised debate between Obama and his Republican rival Senator John McCain when the moderator asked each to elaborate their respective doctrines "where there's a humanitarian crisis, but it does not affect [American] national security".

The moderator mentioned the horrific death toll in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which some put at more than five million in the past decade, Rwanda, Somalia, and the situation in Darfur.

Obama, an advocate of international intervention in Darfur, quickly responded that the US has "moral issues at stake", and pointedly referred to the humanitarian crisis in Darfur.

"Let's take the example of Darfur just for a moment," said Obama. "Right now there's a peacekeeping force that has been set up and we have African Union troops in Darfur to stop a genocide that has killed hundreds of thousands of people.

"We [the US] could be providing logistical support, setting up a no-fly zone at relatively little cost to us, but we can only do it if we can help mobilise the international community and lead."

Such a no-fly zone would have a dramatic effect on the fighting in Darfur by removing a key advantage of the Sudan military, its fleet of aging Antonov bombers that lay waste to Darfur villages in an effort to combat rebels.

McCain was less specific, saying that the US "must do whatever we can to prevent genocide, whatever we can to prevent these terrible calamities that we have said never again (sic)".

McCain offered no commitments, however, saying, "You have to temper your decisions with the ability to beneficially affect the situation." And he went on to cite US humiliations in Somalia, Lebanon and elsewhere.

Regardless of who wins, either man will have a new military organisation for Africa at his disposal. After years of preparation, the US announced the creation of the Africa Command, or Africom, on October 4.

This new organisation is a dramatic shift in how the US views African issues and means that Africa soon will no longer be terra incognita.

According to Africom's top officer, General William E Ward, the command's goal is "to prevent conflict, as opposed to having to react to a conflict".

Africom reflects an expansion of the US's usually myopic view of the world, and signals more US activity on the African continent than ever before.

As a result of 9/11, the Pentagon strategists have realised that forgotten corners of the world, especially failed states, are as much of a threat as terrorist organisations because they can harbor them.

Currently the US has less than 2,000 American combat troops and support personnel in Africa. General Ward suggests that the US does not intend to build up forces quickly, however.

"Bases? Garrisons? It's not about that," General Ward said in the New York Times. "We are trying to prevent conflict, as opposed to having to react to a conflict."

What that means is unclear. But if the recent past is any indication, it means that the US military will be more involved in "coordinating" humanitarian assistance and training African militaries that it deems important or worthy.

The US defense secretary, Robert Gates, calls these "civilian-military partnerships", where the military works hand-in-hand with diplomats and aid agencies.

In Afghanistan, for example, US forces control a big pot of money that is used to dig wells, build schools bring medical care to people in remote areas. This helps to foster cooperation with villagers against the Taleban. It's a simple rule: no intelligence, no help.

Referring to Africom, Gates said the new command "will institutionalise a lasting security relationship with Africa, a vast region of growing importance in the globe".

Gates zeroed in on what I've written previously, that as global oil resources dwindle, African oil and other vast mineral resources will be increasingly sought after.

But there is a downside. On a continent rife with renegade militias composed of child soldiers and badly in need of humanitarian and health aid, more military may not deliver an improvement.

Although Refugees International welcomed Africom for focusing more US attention on African, its President Ken Bacon said he feared the militarisation of US aid.

In a statement, Bacon said that it is important that Africom focuses on training peacekeepers and helping African countries build militaries responsive to democratic government. "The military should stick to military tasks and let diplomats and development experts direct other aspects of US policy in Africa," he said.

Refugees International also noted that the US has allocated 49.65 million US dollars for reforming a 2,000-strong Liberian army to defend the four million people of that country.

But Refugees International point out the US only plans to spend 5.5 million dollars in 2009 to help reform a 164,000-strong army in DR Congo, a country with 65 million people.

Regardless, the creation of Africom, which will operate out of Europe, is a significant shift in US African policy. It undoubtedly will mean major changes and new pressures to curtail the chaos that too often grips the continent.

Darfur could be first on the agenda.

*The views expressed in this article are not necessarily the views of IWPR.*

**Location:** [Africa](#)

**Topic:** [Editorial Comment](#)

**Focus:** [ICC - International Criminal Court](#)

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/us-signals-hands-approach-africa>