Communication Strategy and Synchronization

U.S. Africa Command, Stuttgart Germany

**References**

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2. National Security Council (NSC) Press Guidance on Ebola, 6 November, 2014
3. U.S. Department of State, Response to the Ebola Virus, Fact Sheet, 14 Aug, 2014
4. Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, Communication Assessment 25 Sep 2014
5. U.S. Africa Command Daily Press Summary and Assessment
6. Guidance for the employment of forces (GEF), 123 AUG 2014
7. Commander’s Communication Synchronization (JDN 2-13), 18 Dec 2013
8. Adaptive Planning and Execution (APEX) CJCSM 3130.03, 13 Nov 2012

**Background**

United States has mounted a whole-of-government response to contain and stop the spread of the virus. At the President’s direction, the U.S. Government is coordinating a comprehensive strategy to respond to the threat of Ebola here at home and contain the epidemic in West Africa.

The President’s priority is the health and safety of Americans, and has directed his team to take all necessary steps to stop the chain of transmission and address any shortcomings. Over the longer-term, the only way to prevent additional cases at home will be to contain the epidemic at its source in West Africa.

 The U.S. military support is part of a whole of government effort, including the Department of State, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and others to increase every possible form of assistance to the affected countries, their citizens and international organizations responding to the outbreak.

The Department of Defense, through the Joint Chiefs of Staff, tasked U.S. Africa Command to lead the DOD portion of the comprehensive U.S. Government effort. DOD assistance includes equipment and other essential supplies, USG media and communication synchronization, and technical and medical expertise.

Within Liberia, US Africa Command created a Joint Force Command (JFC) named Operation United Assistance (OUA) to provide on-ground planning and support to the Government of Liberia, leading US Agencies and partnering organizations. The JFC’s efforts include logistics, planning, helping establish Ebola treatment units across Liberia, train health care workers, provide support for communication, press and media support, or other support as needed.

**Commander’s Communication Strategy**

 The U.S. Africa Command overarching intent is that “A Safe, Secure Africa is an enduring American interest.” This intent drives all efforts within Africa. For the US response to the Ebola epidemic, our goal is to help the government of Liberia and lead U.S. agencies overcome the Ebola epidemic. Our end-state vision is a combination of two intents. Success is that West Africa overcomes Ebola while regional safety, stability, and security bolstered in partnership with the U.S. mission. All U.S. military forces supporting “United Assistance” must ensure that their efforts support both the intent and end-state of the mission: In the short-term, to ensure West Africa overcomes Ebola and in the long-term, ensures that the region is safe, secure, and stable.

**Campaign Development**

To support the Joint Chiefs of Staff tasking to coordinate the U.S. government (USG) communication strategy and synchronization, the communication strategy team (J9) assessed the environment and USG effort:

**Audience Assessment**

U.S. and international audiences: Initial Pentagon and media analysis showed high levels of public and media interest in the early U.S. efforts to stop Ebola. Stories and public interest peaked in reaction to U.S. and partner nation citizens who contracted the virus or later returned to their homes and then found they had the virus. As operations continue, press and public interest is slowly dropping. Aid and relief agencies like “Save the Children” and the Red Cross / Crescent lead communication through donation advertisements while the U.S. and partner national leadership supplement through press coverage and updates on current operations.

West Africa and pan-African audiences: Across Africa, Ebola and the international response continues to lead in press coverage and commentary. Within the region, the communication environment is currently permissive. The host nation audiences are overall receptive to host nation USG messaging on stopping Ebola. Areas where populations do not trust the host nation, NGO or U.S. messaging may correlate to also having the highest infection rates. To overcome the gap in trust, U.S. Agencies like USAID and State, and international aid and relief organizations are partnering with local influencers and trusted sources of information to help change local perceptions and influence those populations to prevent, detect and respond to the Ebola outbreak.

The U.S. Africa Command communication strategy assessment: Current media and public interest levels will stabilize with peaks of interest in response to key events like healthcare workers returning to their home country, and then found infected. Visibility will again peak if a vaccination is found. Expect intense public and media coverage with the announcement of a vaccination and the speed in which it can be manufactured and distributed.

**Risks**

**Threats to the operation**

The mission has an array of contingencies that could destabilize U.S. and host national efforts. As threats or weaknesses in the mission develop, U.S. Africa Command staff develops prevention efforts and responses that nullify or mitigate those issues. Forecasting threats and contingencies is based on either historical data of similar events or spotting events and opportunities that could radically shift the operation, forecast its repercussions then plan efforts that bypass the threat or align resources to quickly responds and minimize its impact.

**Opposing Audiences**

Two major opposing audiences challenge countering the Ebola spread. First are audiences who do not trust people from outside the community. The second are audiences that harbor superstition and beliefs that run counter to the prevention and intervention programs. Current efforts by the host nation, USAID and DOS employ both mass-media and working through local influencers or leaders to help sway resistant audiences to accept aid and relief.

The communication environment is complex. Multiple elements, including the host nation, multi-national organizations, nongovernmental groups, and multiple USG elements are communicating on Ebola. To mitigate message and outreach fratricide it is critical that the USG elements and whole of effort partners aggressively synchronize communication and engagements.

An on-ground, communication lead will be designated and a working group will form to orchestrate media and communication planning and engagements.

Elements of the DOD response may need to support partner agencies, in-country, as they lead the effort. Support may include long-term programs that are on hold due to the ongoing crisis. DOD may offer assistance/support to the agencies to ensure that development efforts are not lost (i.e. assistance with exchanges paperwork, scholarship processing, grant writing assistance and management).

All AMCITS, whether USG personnel or private citizens responding to the Ebola crisis are included in the “faces and voices” of US policy efforts for stemming the Ebola epidemic. It is critical that personnel and private citizens understands that their deeds, images and words will affect the U.S. efforts.

**Campaign Structure**

**CDC**: Coordinates the whole of effort on Ebola education for prevention, detection and response. Coordination is through the International Interagency Ebola Communication Coordination (IIECC) group. The IIECC is open to all agencies and organizations that support the Ebola fight. CDC also collects all country plans and communication strategies to find consensus or de-conflict themes and messages across the effort. The CDC also provides a site with ready-to-use products in multiple languages for organizations to use in Ebola outreach efforts.

 **USAID-OFDA**: Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) is the overarching lead for the USG Ebola Response in-country. The DART communication lead, U.S. Embassy, Monrovia and non-governmental organizations lead mass-media and outreach campaigns to educate the public on preventing infection and spotting and reporting symptoms of the virus. The majority of mass media and outreach is through grants to local non-governmental organizations. USAID-OFDA and the US Embassy are also managing local leader and community outreach programs to sway public opinion towards supporting prevention efforts.

**DOS, and US Embassy, Monrovia**: Leads all diplomatic and transit efforts including travel visas, over-flight requests and port access rights. Communication management is split between the Ebola Coordination Unit in D.C. who manages national level issues and non-critical daily Embassy requirements and the department’s Ebola communication lead in country.

**US Africa Command**: The J9 team ensures that military and USG communication efforts are coordinated and timely. Members of the team work with the interagency planning teams on issues like partner nation access for travel and quarantine, plans for emergencies and coalition development and support. Members of the operations team ensure that communication coordination structures are flattened so that Images, actions and words in West Africa are provided to the national level communicators prior to their start of day and vetting policy and guidance from the national level to ensure that those requirements are reasonable to efforts on-ground. Elements of the US Africa Command strategy include:

*Academics*: Be prepared to coordinate and support the mission by collaborating academic efforts to help stem the epidemic.

*Engagements* (local outreach, local leader and senior leader engagements): US Embassy, Monrovia and USAID are leading local outreach and local leader engagements. J9, be prepared to coordinate regional and international engagements.

 *Interagency support*:

1. Assess and support partner agency needs in developing resources and support to fight the spread of Ebola.
2. Provide the commander and staff with insight on interagency issues and operations in order to synchronize efforts and their effects on the mission.

 *Information Operations*:

(1) Provide a Military Information Support Team (MIST) to the US Embassy to provide marketing and communication support to USAID and Embassy operations.

(2) Provide MIST support to tactical messaging to support U.S. Military operations. The messaging is for local audiences to encourage cooperation with humanitarian operations.

(3) Develop, as needed, public information products and coordinate dissemination in support of the federal agencies communication.

(4) Support local USG efforts to protect critical information and Operational Security (OPSEC) through awareness, monitoring and reporting issues to leadership.

(5) Provide a Combat Camera (COMCAM) team to capture still and video of USG and international efforts throughout Liberia.

(6) Develop the information operations cell for the Joint Force Command (JFC) in Monrovia

*Social Media Monitoring*:

(1) Monitor social media networks and report efforts on ground, threats to the mission and opportunities to expand the narrative.

(2) Analyze data and provide the U.S. Africa Command staff with cumulative data.

(3) Provide analysis as available

 *Public / Private Partnerships*:

(1) Coordinate and direct offers for assistance and donations to appropriate agencies and NGO’s.

(2) Work with commercial industry and the Embassy to bolster U.S. ties with Liberia and assist with countering Ebola and maintaining economic stability.

(3) PPP-IR: Update ACJ955 of Non-Federal Entities (NFEs) working in support of Liberia’s efforts to combat Ebola.

 *Public Affairs:*

(1) Manage theater level media operations

(2) Coordinate policy level inquiries to the Office of the Under-Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs (OASD-PA)

(3) Develop communication guidance on media operations.

(4) Assist in developing the media management cell for the Joint Force Command (JFC) in Monrovia

(5) Provide media analysis, impacts on the mission and recommendation for future outreach.

(6) Support the lead military component (U.S. Army Africa) in development and support of the media operations center (MOC).

*Perception Research*:

(1) Develop, monitor and report surveys, environmental comments and reports that highlight MOE’s and MOP’s of the mission and communication campaign.

(2) Organize and implement research to show the effectiveness of the operation, including comparisons of message to impacts on target audiences.

(3) Assist the Command in adjusting the communication campaign to ensure that themes, messages and engagements provide maximum impact on the mission.

**Concept of Operations**

**Overview**

Communication strategy includes the development of the intent and end state for USG efforts to stop the spread of Ebola. Planning the strategy includes developing phases and milestones to guide implementation. Implementation includes In support of U.S. Africa Command implementation in support of Ebola operations in Liberia; communication planning and synchronization ensures that all elements of strategy have clearly defined benchmarks including phasing, milestones and contingencies: See Appendix 1 to Annex Y.

**Specific Guidance**

**Communication Synchronization**

The enduring U.S. Africa Command narrative is that a Safe Stable and Secure Africa is an enduring American interest. This narrative is the over-arching expression of the command’s long term vision for the region. Communication themes and messages for should be nested under this under this narrative and serve as guidance for continuity of messaging. For the Ebola response, U.S. Africa Command is assisting lead federal agencies with DOD-unique capabilities to support overall USG efforts to contain the outbreak, alleviate human suffering, and promote internal and regional stability. It is critical that the operation convey transparency and timeliness in communicating its efforts. For all efforts, actions need to match images and words in supporting the commander’s intent to the mission.

The commander’s communication synchronization orchestrates U.S. Africa Command strategic elements towards achieving the mission and end-state. Communication synchronization works in partnership with the elements listed below to develop specific themes and messages that apply to their area of focus and specific audiences. The goal is for all elements of communication to complement each other in the overall communication campaign.

**Command and Control**

The U.S. Africa Command response to Ebola, communication campaign is managed through a series of stakeholder working groups:

*The Communication Synchronization Working Group* (CSWG): Lead for coordinating U.S. Africa Command communication elements through the campaign. The CSWG convenes weekly

*Communicators Forum*: The regularly scheduled working group focuses on communication coordination with OASD-PA, the State Department Africa Bureaus and other Defense related strategic elements that work at the regional level. The meeting focuses on aligning communication policy and practice between agencies, addressing challenges and sharing resources to meet communication needs.

*Information Operations Working Group (IOWG)*: Regularly scheduled, the IOWG focuses on regional and local marketing and communication campaigns. The meeting typically focuses on current events where DOD has on-ground outreach and draws in a variety of groups that manage mass-media, education, engagements, press management and polling to ensure the campaign to discuss and collaborate on their portion of the communication plan.