

MEDFLAG 10: Synchronizing Public Affairs Activities From a Remote Location

By MAJ Junel R. Jeffrey

Developing partnerships, enhancing capabilities and increasing readiness were the goals that propelled the efforts of U.S. Army Africa (USARAF) and the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) during MEDFLAG 10, a joint humanitarian assistance exercise that took place in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), in September.

Part of a long-term, enduring partnership between the United States and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, MEDFLAG 10 brought together U.S. active duty, Reserve and National Guard servicemembers with their Congolese military personnel counterparts. Together, the two militaries formed a synergetic force that

Top: SSG Cassidy L. Snyder and SGT James D. Sims, 139th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment, Illinois National Guard, photograph exercise participants prior to opening ceremonies for MEDFLAG 10 in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), in September. Center: U.S. Embassy-Kinshasa charge d'affaires Samuel Laeuchli greets LTC Todd Johnston (left) and Surgeon General of the Armed Forces of the DRC (FARDC) Col. Gilbert Kabanda before the MEDFLAG opening ceremony. Bottom: MAJ Curtis Kroh, a physician's assistant with the North Dakota National Guard, is interviewed by DRC reporters as SGT Rachid Lamrissi translates.



U.S. Army/PFC Jason K. Northcutt



U.S. Army/SGT James D. Sims



U.S. Army/SSG Cassidy L. Snyder

Congolese citizens gather in a makeshift waiting room to see U.S. and DRC military medical staff during a humanitarian and civic assistance outreach program in Kinshasa.

jointly planned and conducted an impressive mission that represents an important step forward in the professional growth of the FARDC.

MEDFLAG was initiated in 1987 as a U.S. European Command-sponsored, bilateral medical exercise to facilitate an exchange of medical information and techniques with militaries in Africa. In 2009, the exercise made the transition to oversight from U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), the U.S. regional command that oversees and coordinates U.S. military activities in Africa. This iteration of MEDFLAG involved approximately 300 U.S. and Congolese military medical servicemembers and included several events: an opening ceremony, classroom instruction, a mass-casualty exercise, humanitarian and civic assistance projects, and a closing ceremony.

Even with the relatively small number of participants, there were substantial challenges from the early planning stages. While MEDFLAG activities would take place in the capital city of Kinshasa, persistent reports of alleged human rights violations roughly 1,000 miles away in the Kivu region of eastern DRC made headlines around the world. The reports forced MEDFLAG 10 exercise planners to take into account the possible negative impact the Kivu reports might have on their efforts.

In response, USARAF drafted a MEDFLAG 10 communications strategy that combined social media with conventional media to convey the exercise's objectives to key audiences including U.S. and Congolese policymakers, local DRC civilians, the FARDC military community, regional and international organizations, and the global public. Beyond the actual formulation of a media plan, USARAF public affairs officers (PAOs) partnered with the FARDC public affairs office and the U.S. Embassy-Kinshasa public diplomacy office, form-

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Above left, U.S. Air Force Capt. Vincent Chippone and a FARDC dentist treat a patient in Kinshasa. Above right, Air Force Lt. Col. Jacqueline Garcia-Castellanos works side by side with a FARDC dentist. Capt. Chippone and Lt. Col. Garcia-Castellanos, both reservists, were part of MEDFLAG 10.

ing a relationship that crossed the boundaries of each organization's standard communications procedures and ensured that consistent, synchronized messages informed the public throughout the exercise. Public affairs and public diplomacy officers overcame physical distances and language barriers to implement the communications plan well before the opening-day ceremony.

The communications engagement began with the organization of a five-day visit to AFRICOM headquarters in Stuttgart, Germany, by a delegation of Congolese journalists and other opinion leaders. Organizers sought to educate local Congolese audiences about the U.S. military engagement in DRC by informing the opinion leaders taking part in the delegation.



SPC Ricky Smith, 814th Army Medical Support Company, Detachment 1, Grand Forks, N.D., instructs members of the FARDC how to evaluate a casualty.

The delegation's visit proved to be an overwhelming success, as journalists expressed a clear understanding of U.S. military objectives in DRC through positive coverage of the event. Front-page articles and radio and television coverage reported the open discussions during the trip, highlighting the intent of future U.S. military engagements in DRC. The one-week visit encouraged open communication with the media and set the stage for reaching the local Congolese people through their media.

As MEDFLAG 10 events commenced, U.S. Army Africa PAOs synchronized public communication efforts to put a human face on U.S.-DRC military cooperation. First, the public affairs team worked together through a number of

strategic initiatives to announce exercise objectives and the arrival of U.S. servicemembers in Kinshasa. The FARDC public affairs office used banners, printed handouts, and local radio and television station broadcasts to inform Kinshasa residents about the cooperation they would soon witness between U.S. military and Congolese medical personnel.

The USARAF public affairs team also reached out to international journalists via the Web. Through these efforts, the MEDFLAG 10 humanitarian civilian assistance outreach clearly illustrated direct contact with U.S. and Congolese servicemembers. Medical professionals preregistered and later provided more than 1,700 local Kinshasa residents with medical and dental care.

According to U.S. Embassy officials, event press coverage amplified this engagement: "Local Congolese civilians saw for the first time the direct impact of military cooperation programs in their neighborhood, giving them something they really needed, and putting them in direct contact with American and Congolese military."

Following the humanitarian assistance activities for the



Far left, SGT Zachery Brainerd, 814th Army Medical Support Company, portrays a casualty during training with FARDC in Kinshasa. Left, FARDC quick-reaction-force soldiers assess patients at the triage tent during a simulated mass casualty bus crash. MEDFLAG 10 was designed to enhance DRC emergency response capabilities.

MAJ Angie Allmer, a nurse with the North Dakota National Guard's state medical detachment, accompanies a woman to the humanitarian assistance waiting area during MEDFLAG 10.



U.S. Army / SGT James D. Sains

civilian population, Congolese and U.S. military medical specialists participated in a mass-casualty exercise to demonstrate the FARDC's capability to respond to civilian emergencies. The event showcased the UMIR, FARDC's immediate response medical unit, to U.S. and Congolese dignitaries, who watched the events from a reviewing stand. Public affairs officers strategically placed journalists within arm's reach of UMIR responders as they treated "injured patients." The embassy, USARAF and FARDC public affairs professionals effectively facilitated media coverage to illustrate to the people of Kinshasa the capabilities and possibilities that exist with a fully functional UMIR.

FARDC Surgeon General Col. Gilbert Kabanda said the exercise demonstrated Congolese military communication objectives to the public. "Sick people treated in MEDFLAG 10 are now confident of the DRC military health service capability to assist them," Kabanda said. "At the same time, both officers and soldiers realized through MEDFLAG 10 the technical level demonstrated by UMIR units in combat readiness. Both these positive opinions were and are until now continually expressed among Kinshasa people in different social settings."

Public diplomacy officials noted that the mass-casualty event made a distinctly positive impression on reporters, who witnessed firsthand U.S. and Congolese personnel working together, often with the Congolese in the lead. One media outlet hailed AFRICOM's military-to-military training program and MEDFLAG 10 as "a new military deal between Kinshasa and Washington that bodes well for the DRC's future."

"A program's communication strategy is only as good as the program itself," stated U.S. Embassy-Kinshasa officials. "The mass-casualty event was appreciated for its dramatic video and sense of Congolese ownership. People saw, and that made the Congolese feel good not just about their own military, but also about the Americans."

In addition to facilitating media coverage within the Kinshasa area and utilizing conventional command information channels such as the Defense Media Activity, USARAF informed the global public through the Web. As MEDFLAG 10 took place in Kinshasa, public affairs soldiers from the 139th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment

(MPAD), Illinois National Guard, covered each exercise event and worked together with the USARAF public affairs staff in Vicenza, Italy, to release photos, video and print news articles to the public via the command's Flickr, Twitter and Facebook social media sites.

Given the numerous technological challenges associated with transmitting quality imagery more than 3,400 miles between Africa and Europe, this was not an easy task. Uploading broadcast and print products often took hours, so MPAD soldiers literally worked around the clock dispatching imagery to the USARAF public affairs staff. While the task at hand was indeed difficult, the team's efforts transformed technological challenges into a Web-based success.

"From my perspective, it was pretty amazing," said USARAF webmaster David Ruderman. "All told, with all the technical obstacles that had to be overcome, I think we all managed to put out a steady stream of high-quality reports in close to real time."

Increasing its already extensive social media footprint, USARAF enlisted assistance from Army.mil and the Defense Video and Imagery Distribution System (DVIDS) to further release MEDFLAG 10 products through the Army.mil Africa web site. From its hub in Atlanta, Ga., DVIDS used a precoordinated distribution list to provide exercise imagery to public affairs representatives in each U.S. military service and to civilian media in specified regions of Europe and the United States.

"The National Guard folks kept sending up their stories and photos, either through DVIDS or via e-mail, and for more than a week, we just kept working their material, packaging and posting it for the Web and for wider audiences—AFRICOM and the Army home page," Ruderman said. "I realized they had taken nearly a thousand photos, of which I only saw a few hundred, and may have posted 50 or 60. It was a very impressive body of work."

From language barriers to technological obstacles, the delivery of exercise messages to key audiences was a challenge. The tremendous use of conventional media facilitation and social media tools coupled with the valuable relationships developed throughout the exercise helped team members overcome obstacles and successfully orchestrate an effective information campaign. In partnership with the FARDC and with support from the U.S. Embassy-Kinshasa, the USARAF public affairs team synchronized a successful communications strategy to showcase MEDFLAG 10, demonstrating its commitment to developing enduring partnerships in Africa. ★