

EYES AND EARS IN THE DESERT (INTRODUCTION)

To understand something of Mali one must have a first good look at the map to soon discover that this great country is actually composed of two entirely different regions. The south where the government is seated a reasonably stable region is found and the problems here are not overwhelming. The North is located in the Sahara desert with boundaries drawn as a line through the country. The desert populations in the north do not feel connected to the south and strive for independence, especially the Tuaregs in the economically important region Azawad, uniting in National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA). However, there are many more players in the field in the corners of the desert-land who find their hiding places overthere. Let's have a look at the situation scene and activities within it.

MALI IN SPIRALING VIOLENCE

Smaller independence movements, but also groups Islamists who enter the purpose of the Sharia as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar Dine and later the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) came to it. Then in late 2011 many Tuaregs who fought as mercenaries for Gaddafi returned from Libya with heavy weapons, the ongoing conflict between the Malian army and the MNLA got a boost. The MNLA started an uprising in January 2012 in Azawad which expanded rapidly. The Malian army felt insufficiently supported by President Touré and staged a coup. Further destabilization followed, and large areas in the North had to be given price. Actually the Islamists (using the MNLA as primer and initially operating as previously supportive) received an increasing power base in the north and the population was brutally treated repressive under Sharia. There was declared a jointly independence, but the MNLA then again gave struggle with the Islamists who had most areas under control.

OPERATION 'SERVAL'

With an interim president and with the influence of neighboring African countries through ECOWAS organization the UN Security Council Resolution 2085 was submitted, which resulted in the peacekeeping force AFISMA. When the rebels were positioned 600 km from Bamako by taking the city of Konna, the help from former colonial power France was invoked which loomed the specter of another Afghanistan or Yemen. France also had a problem to solve with AQIM, who had murdered French citizens. The French military operation "Serval" in collaboration with the Malian army drove the terrorist rebels back across the border or in vast inhospitable areas or they went hiding into the local population. Parallel to the downsizing of Operation Serval "the UN mission was scaled-up and was named MINUSMA meaning Mission Multi Dimension Elle intégrée des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation au Mali (in English: United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali) directed from the capital Bamako in the south. MINUSMA was to prepare the way to stabilization and political dialogue for all parties who were also sitting at table at conferences in Algiers discussing the future of Mali.

For convenience, the parties were divided into Compliant Armed Groups (CAG) and Armed Terrorist Groups (TAG). The parties with terrorist and jihadist purposes were excluded from the negotiating table. If one puts a further scoop on Mali then that shows even more complicated. Thus there exists alongside the MNLA also the MAA (Arab Movement for Azawad) and the HCUA (High Counsel for the unity of Azawad) sometimes cooperate and sometimes again his rival. Gradually, the spectrum is extended to movements because there is now also a Tuareg movement against the Group of Imrated Touareg and allies (GATIA) which is against independence and fights against the MNLA. GATIA itself also tries to become a CAG. Not infrequently again splinter movements arise from previous organizations.

ROYAL NETHERLANDS AIRFORCE ASKED FOR ITS QUALITY

It should be clear that to obtain an overview is an important property. To find out what is going on

intelligence is indispensable information. What does each player do in the field and what is his purpose? The safety of the 'blue helmet' peacekeepers is therefore the benefit, but also this way is controlled if what parties claim to the negotiating table is correct. The Netherlands have been asked to deliver its potential because it is very suitable for the mission. They do have excellent Special Forces (SOF) with extensive experience from previous programs such as Afghanistan. They come from the Commando Corps of the Army and Marine Corps and operate in Mali as unit in the Special Operations Task Group country (SOLTG). They are specifically charged with obtaining information and operate from Gao, an important city in the South-Eastern part of the Northern desert with their own vehicles such as light armored Bushmasters, tactical Mercedes Benz (MB) G280 CDI vehicles and Fennek reconnaissance vehicles. There is also access to quads for short distances in the terrain.

Royal Netherlands Airforce decided to agree to the request to provide Apache helicopters which have received the primary task to gather intelligence. Air support in case necessary to ensure the security of its own people incidentally can occur but for everyone as well who operates under MINUSMA in this country. That's a lot of nationalities, including close to the Dutch soldiers stationed there forces from China, Chad, Niger and Bangladesh. The Dutch mission began in April 2014 and consists of about 450 men and women, four Apache helicopters and three Chinook helicopters of the Defence Helicopter Command (DHC). Halfway through 2015, the government decides whether to prolong the mission. Besides land and air operations the Dutch provide people to teach the police taskforce and staff in Bamako. In Bamako is stationed the All Sources Information Fusion Unit (ASIFU), but it gets its information from the sector headquarters in Gao and Timbuktu.

Information is not obtained only with patrolling on the ground by a 'human terrain team' and 'seeing with your own eyes', but also flights operated by ScanEagle drones. Live video can be forwarded. With the aid of a light-efficient two-stroke engine, the Scan Eagle can remain 22 consecutive hours in the air. In addition, the helicopters are the eyes in the sky where everything is deployed, even Nikon cameras come along. Of course, the Apaches with their extensive sensors are to be the most suitable and can also operate nightly. The thus-obtained pattern of activities on the ground are of crucial importance for the entire UN operation. As the Apaches can trace roadside-bombs or Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) and also detect hidden missiles. By means of the Apaches already several 120mm rockets have been found.

GATHER INTELLIGENCE

A mission can look as follows. Somewhere in the desert a Scan Eagle is launched with a catapult system by soldiers of the Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance Company (ISR). This UAV is used to obtain information through the images that are made. These can be analyzed and shared with any other parties with the aim to prevent primary escalation of violence. Observed suspicious activity finally come to the Force Commander which can be viewed, and decisions can be made what kind of action is needed. In the past was sometimes a UN mission was called toothless, it is certainly not the case now. There is a strong mandate and force may be used. On the basis of the information gathered by the Dutch, there are several special forces in the region which can intervene, which is called 'direct action'. If necessary, this can be done from out of the air.

Especially for this, anywhere in the country 'landing sites' are mapped by the MAOT teams brought by Chinooks and sometimes by reconnaissance on the way. The Scan Eagle is used to fly and gather the required information for the requested good mapping. On the way back it is directed to a certain point and taken out of the air with a special Skyhook. The actions are purely for the purpose of MINUSMA, but if it is necessary to share information in the general security image with the French- and/or Malian soldiers than it is possible, as long as it is not planned for their surgery. The operation 'Serval' meanwhile is renamed the counter terrorism operation 'Barkhane' and France operates its air units from the same location as the Dutch.

DHC HELICOPTERS INDISPENSABLE

The Dutch helicopters of the Defence Helicopter Command (DHC) are detached on camp "Castor" in Gao, each under a large 'Sunshade' and three sided protected by Hesco's. Additionally, a continuous Force Protection (FP, in Dutch 'OGRV', Object Ground Defense) is acting 24/7 as guards of military or air forces objects for it is not excluded that there are groups who just would like to demolish these objects, or make planes or helicopters unusable. For the pilots themselves it's just waiting for an order. In the meantime, just live with the heat in the middle of the Sahara and especially: drinking water ! Then you should suddenly be prepared. Rather, during the night when it's less hot, but it's just as it is

requested. One is also dependent on the weather situation, for desert storms just come up and then the red desert sand is everywhere, even in your ears. At such moment you can't do anything until the storm subsides as suddenly as it has risen. The maintenance status is fine and the Chinooks are equipped with blade tapes, rubbers that are glued on the leading edge of the blade, and Engine Air Particle Separators (EAPS's) both as protection against the sand. Currently there are two "Clam Shells" for base maintenance. We spoke Lt. Colonel Sjoerd Lodewijks who was commander of the helicopter detachment 3 during the mission between September 15, 2014 and January 15, 2015. In his time, the Chinook (nickname 'Grizzly') was active, because the first two detachments concerned only Apaches. People were getting better in the field and every day to the heat declined a bit, infrastructure had become better in eating and sleeping facilities, armored areas were built all around. Has to be, because the camp was already once bombarded with missiles. With the arrival of the Chinooks, the focus also broadened.

The possibility of medical evacuation (medevac) was necessary because the UN is in a region where bloody battles between parties often occur, which result in civilian casualties and where peacekeeper-battalions fall under attack or encounter mines all of a sudden. Besides medevac transport logistics also a network is started for supplying "far remote 'UN -posts diesel, food and water. But the convoys can not always 'just' travel over roads, because there is always the danger of hostilities. There's never a helicopter flying solo but always in two-ship formation or more. If something happens on the spot in the desert, there is absolutely nothing there... The safety and range from health facilities is an absolute prerequisite. Also from the base itself medevac in short time is guaranteed, as Lt.Col. Sjoerd explains. At all times we have a Chinook and Apache in position stand by. Also, the machines are available for planned actions such as dropping a SOLTG team. These people will sometimes be operating in the North for days long. There is also the need to collect them directly within the medical area for adequate medical treatment if necessary.

The treatments is quite on a high level at Gao. Transporting troops (logistically) from other UN units is infrequent. Getting the 'situational awareness' in focus is the first task and priority and provides a lot of work. If the situation gets out of hand such as that the SOLTG team comes under fire, then a Forward Air Controller amongst them provides the helicopters with essential information. The resistance we may encounter is not just gunfire but notorious are the 'technicals', a pickup with a gun mounted behind. These are Multi-Barrels, meant for flat trajectory fire, but you can also use them against helicopters. So far we have not had this incident yet.

INCIDENT AT TABANKORT

Both day and night missions take place, but more often flying during the day. If there is no moon (red illum), the desert is pitch dark, and the danger of 'brown out' occurs there even more. Nobody goes unprepared to crisis areas, first the phases of upgrading and training follow. Some techniques have to be "current" before one is sent. It is of utmost importance that "sand blaze landings are mastered, because you do not like to lose a helicopter. One is trained here sufficiently and also one has pre-sufficient interaction with Special Forces training done for example in Portugal. (Hotblade exercise) Hot and also high has also been practiced. That is a bonus because the Northeastern part of the desert in Mali in the Kidal region, bordering Algeria is characterized by the Adrar des Ifoghas mountains with peaks between 800-900m. Incidentally, it is not the policy to operate secretly because this can lead to a negative consideration about us. Goodwill keep as a neutral organization is very important.

Recently, an Apache helicopter of detachment 4 destroyed a Tuareg vehicle with a hell fire missile in Tabankort near Kidal, a car that was central in a battle with 122mm rockets. A blue helmets unit came under fire between the MNLA and GATIA units. Despite warning shots the battle was not stopped and the Apache was forced to eliminate the vehicle. This led to violent protests the following day by women and children at the airport of Kidal. It was acted completely under the rules of engagement (ROE), but the Tuareg see this very different from Islamic law and they demand compensation for the relatives of the deceased. The UN, however, has established after thorough research that the action was entirely within the mandate. An Apache was held in Kidal during the troubled period to intervene directly if necessary. It's happened before that temporary deployment was needed in the northern Kidal or Menara.

COOPERATION SHOULD LEAD TO GOOD RESULTS.

Apaches do fly area-scans for SOLTG to gather necessary information and this way hidden missiles were discovered end 2014. A SOLTG group was sent out for confirming information. Initially they were stopped, but the Apache's 'show of force' achieved they managed to reach the missiles. The UN

headquarters decided to a seizure. The Force Commander, by then the Rwandan Major General Jean Bosco Kazura, spoke words of thanks to 'his Dutch'. New negotiations will determine how to proceed in Mali. Sjoerd expected that by 2015 much time and energy is needed to get people together and see a huge UN building in the northern towns of Kidal, Menara and Tessalit and so this probably will exist beyond 2015. With AQIM terrorists against the Mauritanian border and Ansar Dine, and possible ISIS in the eastern mountains of the Algerian border, and in between clashes amongst eachother like Tuareg groups in the Tilemsi valley, all in all it remains a risky operation.

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