
PSYOP in Somalia: The Voice of Hope

by Lt. Col. Charles P. Borchini and Mari Borstelmann

P psychological operations saved tens of thousands of lives during the Gulf War, and during Operation Restore Hope in Somalia, PSYOP proved to have remarkable adaptability to peacetime operations as well.

Operation Restore Hope began in early December 1992, when President George Bush announced that the U.S. would lead a “coalition of the willing” in committing a significant military force to help ensure the delivery of much-needed humanitarian assistance to the people of Somalia.

From the outset, PSYOP was integrated into all plans and operations. Almost immediately after the president’s announcement, PSYOP staff planners from the 4th PSYOP Group at Fort Bragg, N.C., were dispatched to the U.S. Central Command at MacDill Air Force Base, Fla. Their mission was to integrate PSYOP into the plans of both the U.S.-led Unified Task Force, or UNITAF, and its components from 22 countries.

During the five-month period prior to the May 4, 1993, change of command from UNITAF to the United Nations Opera-

tions in Somalia, or UNOSOM II, the main focus of psychological operations was to facilitate the flow of information between Somalis and the organizations responsible for implementing the humanitarian mission of Operation Restore Hope.

To ensure that PSYOP would be consistently applied and that PSYOP assets could respond to a broad spectrum of operational requirements, UNITAF formed a joint PSYOP task force, which worked directly for the UNITAF commander, Lt. Gen. Robert Johnston. The JPOTF’s mission was to provide advice, to analyze PSYOP-relevant intelligence and produce all printed products (leaflets, handbills, posters), including a Somali-language newspaper, and to transmit radio broadcasts via AM, FM and shortwave programming.

According to Johnston, “Having understood the potential impact of PSYOP, I was extremely interested in having PSYOP up front for this operation, because I thought the most useful part of PSYOP would be that it would prevent armed conflict.”

Composed of 125 soldiers and civilians from the U.S. Army’s 4th PSYOP Group, one U.S. Navy sailor and a dozen Somali linguists, the JPOTF worked with coalition forces, senior U.S. and U.N. civilians, and nongovernmental and private volunteer organizations. Throughout the course of Restore Hope, the JPOTF designed, produced and disseminated large numbers of



Photo courtesy 4th PSYOP Group

A U.S. soldier oversees the delivery of supplies in Somalia.

more than a dozen different handbills and posters; issued 116 editions of a Somali-language newspaper; transmitted radio broadcasts twice daily; produced and disseminated more than seven million leaflets; deployed tactical PSYOP teams with the coalition forces; and provided advice to the U.S. special envoy, Ambassador Robert Oakley and his staff.

Tactical operations

The first PSYOP soldiers deployed from Fort Bragg to Mombasa, Kenya, where they joined the U.S. 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit aboard the USS Tripoli. They accompanied the initial Marine landing at Mogadishu on Dec. 9. Over the next several weeks, eight tactical PSYOP teams accompanied UNITAF ground forces as they deployed throughout central and southern Somalia to secure relief convoys and to promote stability.

From the initial landing on the beach at Mogadishu to the May 1993 transition to UNOSOM II, the eight tactical PSYOP teams participating in Operation Restore Hope faced many challenges. Using their loudspeakers, teams broadcast numerous messages to the Somalis, including surrender appeals, procedures to follow during weapons sweeps and at roadblocks, and announcements to organize crowds at feeding sites. Tactical PSYOP teams also distributed the UNITAF newspaper *Rajo* in many of the major towns and villages in each humanitarian-relief sector.

In Mogadishu, Marine maneuver commanders integrated tactical PSYOP teams into complex security operations that targeted the local arms markets. In mid-January 1993, for example, a Marine operation directed against an area of the city known as the Argentine Arms Market used tactical PSYOP teams to inform local residents of the operation and to request

their support and noninterference. Heliborne PSYOP personnel thanked the crowds as Marines cleared the area and dropped leaflets informing the people of Mogadishu that the objective of the operation was to improve security in the city.

Maj. Gen. Charles E. Wilhelm, commander of U.S. Marine Forces in Somalia, described the tactical PSYOP teams as “a combat subtractor ... they reduced the amount of unnecessary bloodshed by convincing Somali gunmen to surrender rather than fight.”

Acting as the “scout platoon” of the JPOTF, tactical PSYOP teams used face-to-face communication to assess the security environment and to collect PSYOP-relevant information. This was also the most effective means for PSYOP soldiers



A tactical PSYOP team informs Somali citizens of an upcoming military operation.

Photo courtesy 4th PSYOP Group



Photo courtesy 4th PSYOP Group

U.S. soldiers distribute copies of the Rajo newspaper to Somali children.

to assist the humanitarian-relief-sector maneuver commanders in understanding the perceptions, attitudes and concerns of the Somali people. Tactical PSYOP teams met directly with village elders and religious leaders to reinforce UNITAF messages presented in the Rajo newspaper and in radio broadcasts.

In addition to using traditional PSYOP methods of communicating with the local population, tactical PSYOP teams found unique ways of using their interpersonal skills. While waiting for officers to return from a community meeting, one team attracted a crowd of several hundred curious children. After many attempts to disperse the children, one soldier thought that they might be distracted by playing a game. Once he explained the rules and started the game, the children joined in enthusiastically, and the remaining soldiers were able to return to their mission.

Rajo newspaper

On Dec. 20, four days after the arrival of the main contingent of forces in Mogadishu, the JPOTF began publishing

a daily newspaper and broadcasting a daily radio program — both called “Rajo,” which is Somali for “hope.” Rajo, the Somali-language newspaper, of which more than 27,000 copies were published daily, was eventually distributed to every town and village where UNITAF forces were deployed.

At the beginning of operations, the Rajo publishing and editorial staff included 4th PSYOP Group soldiers and civilian specialists as well as Somali linguists from the U.S. Rajo articles covered a number of relevant issues but generally focused on military operations to secure Mogadishu and each of the major towns, humanitarian relief provided to the famine areas, redevelopment efforts, hope for the future and analyses of the reconciliation and national-unity process.

Regular features included interviews with relief-agency staff, public-health information on treating common childhood diseases, the status of security in each humanitarian-relief sector, reports on rebuilding the educational system and judicial institutions, and forming local police forces and security councils.

As a complement to the newspaper, the JPOTF established Radio Rajo, a 45-minute, Somali-language program transmitted twice daily on AM/medium wave, FM and shortwave. The program included readings from the Koran, Rajo newspaper articles, selections of Somali poetry and short stories, news about Africa, significant events throughout the world and Somali music. The programs broadcast over shortwave eventually reached every city and town in Somalia where UNITAF forces were located.

Guided by a broadcast journalist from the 4th PSYOP Group, a team of Somali staff members, PSYOP specialists and

civilian analysts worked together to develop articles that incorporated a number of themes encouraging Somali clans to put aside their differences and rebuild their country. Themes included the following:

- Fairness of UNITAF rules of engagement.
- Impartiality of UNITAF.
- The need for Somalis to resolve Somalia's problems.
- Inability of UNITAF and relief agencies to do more than assist in the resolution process.
- Roles and capabilities of the 22 nations participating in UNITAF.
- Redevelopment and re-establishment of Somalia's infrastructure.
- Agreements made by faction leaders and the consequences of violating those agreements.

- Disarmament progress in each humanitarian-assistance sector.

The process of collecting information required routine research efforts beyond Mogadishu. In January 1993, for example, JPOTF staff members traveled to the town of Marka, where they interviewed President Aadan 'Abdullah' Usmaan, Somalia's first head of state and an important symbol of national unity. Excerpts from this interview were published in the newspaper and broadcast over Radio Rajo as well.

One of the most popular features of the newspaper was a cartoon devoted to the comments and the observations of a Somali man named Celmi (after the U.S. Navy sailor who was born in Somalia and served as a linguist for the JPOTF) and his wise friend, the camel Mandeeq. The dialogue between these two characters reinforced



Photo by Terry Mitchell



Photo courtesy 4th PSYOP Group

(Above) A soldier from the joint PSYOP task force produces material for broadcast over Radio Rajo.

(Left) A U.S. Marine hands out copies of the Rajo newspaper to waiting Somalis.

various PSYOP themes and described specific aspects of the UNITAF mission.

A consistent propaganda theme broadcast by one of the local warlords over his radio station and published in his faction's newspaper was that UNITAF — U.S. forces in particular — was exploiting Somalia's precious natural resources. PSYOP countered this propaganda by broadcasting and publishing stories in the *Rajo* describing the true nature of engineering activities throughout Somalia.

In an effort to encourage national unity and to revitalize Somali traditional culture, *Rajo* sponsored a poetry contest and published the six winning entries in a special edition of the paper. Commenting on the importance of *Rajo* to the success of the operation, Ambassador Robert Oakley said, "We are using *Rajo* to get the correct information into the hands of the Somali

population and to correct distortions. ... The faction leaders, I know, read it very, very carefully. Every once in a while Aideed or Ali Mahdi ... draws my attention to something that appeared in the newspaper. So they're very, very sensitive to it and they know its power."

Leaflet operations

The initial landing of U.S. forces in Mogadishu on Dec. 9 was preceded by a drop of approximately 220,000 leaflets from a U.S. Marine CH-53 Sea Stallion helicopter. This operation used two kinds of leaflets to announce the arrival of U.S. forces and to alert inhabitants of the need for convoy-security missions. The "handshake" leaflet communicated the basic message that the intent of the mission was to assist, not harm Somalis; the convoy-security leaflet stressed that coalition

U.S. Marines control crowds of Somalis waiting to receive medical treatment. PSYOP leaflets stressed that U.S. forces came to help, not harm, the Somalis.



Photo by Terry Mitchell

troops would use force to protect the relief shipments. These three-by-six-inch leaflets had been printed at Fort Bragg by the 4th PSYOP Group.

Throughout the operation, PSYOP teams, using U.S. C-130s, U.S. Marine CH-53s, U.S. Army UH-60s and UH-1s, and a Canadian C-130, continued to drop the two leaflets along major supply routes. The handshake leaflets were dropped two or three days prior to the arrival of UNITAF forces in each town; the convoy leaflets were dropped two or three days afterward. During one operation, PSYOP teams used U.S. Navy S-3 Viking fixed-wing aircraft to jettison 60 canisters, each carrying 2,500 leaflets, over the target area. With the gradual redeployment of U.S. C-130s, leaflet missions were also conducted from New Zealand Andovers, a small version of the DC-3.

The handshake and convoy-security leaflets were only two of 37 different leaflets eventually produced during Restore Hope. Even after the establishment of the newspaper and the radio program, UNITAF continued to use leaflets, designed and printed by the JPOTF in Somalia, to support military operations. Leaflets announced rules prohibiting specific categories of weapons and behavior and informed local communities that coalition troops were authorized to use force if they were threatened. While the rules for each major town were roughly the same, they reflected local conditions and were modified as the security environment changed. Tactical PSYOP teams attached to Army and Marine forces in each humanitarian-relief sector requested leaflets with themes based on the specific situation confronting each maneuver commander. Leaflet concepts were coordinated with the UNITAF director of operations and then designed, printed and dropped over the



Photo by Mark Dwyer

U.S. forces deploy leaflet bundles over Somalia.

target areas. Announcements published in the Rajo reinforced leaflet messages.

Leaflets, handbills and posters supported several engineering projects as well. In December and again in March, engineers cleared Mogadishu's streets of abandoned and destroyed vehicles, downed telephone poles, sand, debris and other objects that blocked the flow of traffic along major roads and near market areas. Later in the operation, Army engineers and Navy Seabees repaired or constructed more than 1,200 miles of roads, drilled 14 wells, and erected a Bailey bridge across the Juba River near the town of Jilib. Leaflets, handbills and posters complemented each effort by informing the Somali people of the upcoming operation and asking them to cooperate by staying clear of hazardous engineering equipment. These products



Photo courtesy 4th PSYOP Group

A civilian relief worker helps distribute supplies to Somali citizens during Operation Restore Hope.

also requested that Somalis report mine locations.

PSYOP also supported several humanitarian-relief operations conducted by non-governmental organizations. A major problem facing Somalia is the large number of displaced persons and refugees who were forced to leave their homes during the civil war. With no reliable source of food or medical care, these groups have become totally dependent on relief provided by the NGOs.

The “pastoral scene” leaflet supported programs encouraging displaced persons and refugees to return to their homes when it was safe to do so, in order to harvest their crops and to begin planting for the next growing season. The goal of this leaflet, and of articles written for Rajo describing specific NGO resettlement programs, was to help break the cycle of dependency and to encourage self-sufficiency.

Mine-awareness

Like many nations around the world, Somalia has a serious problem with

mines. During Operation Restore Hope, mine explosions killed or injured several UNITAF personnel as well as many Somalis. PSYOP specialists produced several different posters and published articles in the Rajo newspaper advising Somalis to be aware of mine hazards.

Toward the end of the operation, PSYOP also produced coloring books detailing the first-aid requirements for victims of mine-related accidents; handbills explaining how to exit a mine field safely; and posters illustrating the most common mines found in Somalia. The underlying message was the same: “Report, don’t touch, mines.” Copies of the products were also distributed to other members of the UNITAF coalition.

Contingency operations

At the end of February 1993, on the first day of Ramadan, violent demonstrations took place in the area of Mogadishu controlled by Mohamed Farah Aideed, leader of the Somali National Alliance. Following the demonstrations, children began carrying toy handguns, which they pointed at UNITAF forces. By the end of Ramadan, toy guns were prevalent throughout the city, and there were several incidents in which UNITAF forces came close to shooting children, thinking the guns were real. The JPOTF initiated a campaign to address the problem in the Rajo newspaper, over the radio and in leaflets. The Rajo radio program included an interview with a prominent representative of a Somali women’s group who spoke in very strong terms about the dangers of the children’s behavior. Fortunately, there were no accidents, and the number of incidents eventually decreased.

PSYOP also responded quickly to the repeated crises in Kismayo. After Hersi Morgan took Kismayo in late February,

Johnston and Ambassador Oakley issued an ultimatum for him to withdraw his forces to a town on the Kenya border. The JPOTF produced and dropped leaflets informing Morgan's supporters, as well as the people of Kismayo and other major towns in the lower Juba valley, of the situation.

PSYOP was a key battlefield operating system and contributed significantly to the success of Operation Restore Hope. As Johnston later said, "PSYOP really worked well to convince (Somalis) that we were there with the military capability to take care of the factions, and that we were going to provide support and safety. I think that was the (unique) dimension of PSYOP."

Operation Restore Hope focused international attention on the challenges that military forces face as they apply their combat talents and training in support of difficult humanitarian objectives. The soldiers of the 4th PSYOP Group who served in the JPOTF readily adapted to the challenge. Having witnessed PSYOP's direct contribution to Somalia's first steps toward peace and reconstruction, these soldiers are now even better prepared to participate in future peacekeeping operations. ✂

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