

The New Spice Route for Africa

BY LIEUTENANT COLONEL DAVID L. CORRICK, USAFR



Commercial trucking has been used sporadically over the years by the Department of Defense (DOD) in East Africa without a comprehensive plan. However, because of short timelines and a lack of standardized processes for surface movement, airlift remains the predominant means of delivering supplies to units dispersed in the Horn of Africa (HOA).

The New Spice Route team, which includes the Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa (CJTF–HOA), U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), U.S. Army Africa (USARAF), U.S. Naval Forces Africa, and the Military Surface Deployment and Distribution Command (SDDC), seeks to change that. Led by the CJTF–HOA J–4, the New Spice Route team matches all DOD shippers with the right commercially contracted capability through the expertise of USARAF.

New Spice Route Beginnings

The New Spice Route, established by CJTF–HOA, is designed to minimize AFRICOM’s reliance on military airlift by developing reliable surface movement options across East Africa. Trucks carrying no-longer-needed equipment started moving in February 2011 from Garissa and Manda Bay, Kenya, to the Port of Mombasa and then on to Djibouti. A shorter run with fresh fruits and vegetables departed Kampala, Uganda, for a training camp on the way to Entebbe.

In February 2012, trucks with construction supplies

and provisions began rolling from Djibouti to Dire Dawa, Ethiopia. Still in its nascent stages, the line-haul program has been adding to local economies, while CJTF–HOA promotes stability through its many programs.

Expanding the New Spice Route

At CJTF–HOA’s East Africa Coalition Conference, held in January 2011 in Djibouti, the Army’s lead planner, Chris Zahner, said, “Marco Polo wasn’t just an explorer; he was also a logistician developing logistics nodes along the Silk Road. Now let’s do something similar where the Queen of Sheba traveled.”

Gloria Evans, CJTF–HOA’s J–4 Fusion Cell chief, turned the concept into a joint plan and process. “As a supported command [that is] building partner nation capacity, we rely on external sources for movement,” Evans said. “Working together with our DOD partners to develop better contracts covering East Africa, with seamless connections to sealift, is the way to take pressure off of the C–130 fleet, save Defense dollars, and support local economies.” She noted that even U.S.-owned companies use local subcontractors to ship throughout the region.

By creating a network that will eventually span all of Africa, the New Spice Route complements and enhances the services currently provided by the SDDC through theater-managed indefinite-delivery, indefinite-

These trucks are parked at a truck stop on the highway from Djibouti to Ethiopia. Line haul in Africa is a no-frills business, and leaving it up to the local-national truck drivers is the best choice on a continent with seasonal roads and only a few status of forces agreements.

quantity contracts. USARAF synchronizes the overall effort. This system has been called the Africa Surface Distribution Network, and CJTF-HOA's New Spice Route is its first application.

New Spice Route Challenges and Benefits

The Africa Surface Distribution Network fits squarely within AFRICOM's Adaptive Logistics Network. Similar to the U.S. Central Command- and Department of State-coordinated proposal for the Middle East known as the New Silk Road, the New Spice Route emphasizes both land and sea transportation solutions. As challenging as the New Silk Road Route from Asia to Europe can be, CJTF-HOA and its partners operate in an area truly forsaken by 20th century advances in road and rail.

"We didn't even consider trying to line-haul direct from Kenya to Djibouti," said Evans. "Our move from Garissa took us to the port of Mombasa, then on to Djibouti by sea."

According to Air Force Master Sergeant Allen Rickles, CJTF-HOA Joint Logistics Operations Center noncommissioned officer-in-charge, the movement of cargo from Manda Bay to Mombasa by truck, then to Djibouti by sea (instead of by air), saved the Government \$380,000 in February 2011. The sealift portion from Mombasa to Djibouti mirrors one of the legs of the original Spice Route.

Hans Garcia, the sustainment branch chief at AFRICOM's Deployment and Distribution Operations Center, says this combination of land and sea movement of supplies supports the theater distribution plan. Navy Lieutenant John Belisle, Camp Lemonnier's first installation transportation officer, adds that the New Spice Route also builds equity and economies of scale, especially when all of the DOD branches are using the same route.

"I'm glad I am part of something innovative," Lieutenant Belisle said. "The Spice Route saves the Government money, and we're looking forward to the advanced tracking technologies our civilian partners have to offer—a kind of high-tech version of an old idea."

Navy Lieutenant Marcus Thomas, a regional logistics planner with CJTF-HOA J-4, says that the New Spice Route offers increased flexibility. "Sustaining our forward operating locations has been historically challenging, particularly in Ethiopia, where our Navy Seabees had no other option but to use their own equipment



This map shows the New Spice Route that is used to move supplies in East Africa.

to receive and transport supplies and materials," said Lieutenant Thomas. "By using local commercial truckers who know how to navigate the roads and customs procedures, our guys can focus less on moving their materials around and more on their tasks of building schools and drilling wells."

CJTF-HOA's New Spice Route is truly transformational for DOD, even if it simply builds on existing commercial trade routes. In a time of shrinking budgets, concern about carbon footprints, and ongoing military commitments, every kilometer trucked is a step ahead toward networking East Africa, where the Queen of Sheba traveled with her riches more than 2,000 years ago, and it represents another pillar of AFRICOM's adaptive logistics network concept contributing to stability and progress.

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