

Staff Visits as a Tool for Security Force Assistance

Staff assistance visits can help deploying units frame problems in a foreign institutional environment.

■ By Capt. Denny Luong

In a garrison environment, inspections and staff visits are a regular part of conducting business for an Army headquarters staff. These visits serve as internal measurements of a unit's compliance with Army standards and help commanders make better decisions in executing their duties. In a security force assistance (SFA) environment, inspections and staff visits are also valuable tools for training and mentoring foreign forces.

The 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) Sustainment Brigade, also known as "Lifeliners," demonstrated this capability when it sent a four-man advisory team to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) National Logistics School from April to August 2017. The rotation's purpose was to increase the school's ability to develop DRC logistics officers and soldiers at the institutional level.

This article examines how the advisory team applied the principles and elements of a staff assistance visit to an SFA mission to identify issues and measure performance at the DRC National Logistics School. This process created a shared understanding among U.S. forces, interagency partners, and host-nation forces. This shared understanding later enabled the team to execute its corrective training with the full support of the project participants.

Background

In late 2014, U.S. Army Africa and the Department of State started an initiative to professionalize

the DRC National Logistics School. The project's purpose was to help the DRC create technically competent logisticians to fill positions across its armed forces. This initiative was part of African Horizons, a series of SFA missions that took place across the African continent.

Initially spearheaded by the Army Logistics University, the mission relied on regionally aligned forces to provide institutional logistics advisory teams (ILATs). The 101st Airborne Division Sustainment Brigade was the third regionally aligned force to send ILATs in support of African Horizons.

Inspection Principles

The Lifeliners' ILAT that was deployed in 2017 was tasked with teaching and mentoring the school's staff on instructor-centered planning and assessment programs. This was part of the Department of State and U.S. Army Africa's requirements to build the technical competence of the school's staff members.

The ILAT conducted the mission as a staff assistance visit to serve two functions: to generate baseline statistics about the school's operations and to demonstrate the benefits gained by implementing an assessment program for the school's staff. These functions aligned with the principles of any Army inspection or staff assistance visit.

Army Regulation 1-201, Army Inspection Policy, lists five principles of an inspection (or staff assistance visit):

- Purposeful.
- Coordinated.
- Focused on feedback.
- Instructive.
- Followed-up.

Purposeful. Inspections should be performance-oriented events tailored to the specific organization. Because the objective partially relied on implementing an assessment program for the logistics school, the inspection format became the model for the school's staff to emulate.

The challenge was finding the right measures of performance. The team sought measures of performance matching the school's goal of becoming a regional logistics center of excellence. Therefore, the team opted to grade the instructors on their logistics knowledge and teaching ability. This focus on instructor-level competencies formed the frame of the new assessment program.

Coordinated. The inspection plan complemented other agencies' efforts to measure performance at the school whenever possible. While avoiding duplication of effort, the team found that assisting other agencies helped its own execution as well.

For example, the ILAT included additional criteria for evaluation at the request of the Department of State's logistics advisors. So the team identified more problem areas, such as lesson plan development and planned follow-on training. This helped the team form a more holistic training package for the school and helped the Department of State

advisors with their information requirements.

Focused on feedback. The inspection generated a report that outlined the school's strengths and weaknesses to the project's participants, including the logistics school staff and Department of State personnel.

The team presented its results as numerical scores when possible to quantify the results. For example, the team's rubric outlined a grading scheme in which the highest score attainable was a 3 and the lowest was a 0. The average of the instructors' individual assessments made up the

school's overall rating in a particular category.

The team found that by presenting numerical scores, the host-nation forces understood the results better than when they were given verbal descriptions with meanings that could be lost in translation.

Instructive. The team used its initial assessment as both a demonstration of the desired end state and a staff visit. The school's command saw the potential uses firsthand rather than receiving an explanation from the team.

The advisors also conducted class-

es examining the evaluated criteria in further detail and retrained the school's cadre on their weakest areas. For example, while the school's instructors earned high marks overall on logistics knowledge and answered questions clearly, the team assisted in topics such as course planning and visual aid creation. The resulting improvements in those areas balanced the school's existing strengths.

Followed-up. Both the inspected and inspecting units must develop and execute plans to correct deficiencies and then conduct follow-up inspections.

Sgt. Fredrick Stone assists Capt. Nkie Mboranda with lesson planning at the Democratic Republic of the Congo National Logistics School's computer lab on June 22, 2017. (Photo by Capt. Denny Luong)



For example, after learning to conduct internal assessments of its own instructors, the DRC National Logistics School staff executed follow-on assessments under the supervision of U.S. advisors to ensure the staff met the new standards. This function validated the new inspector teams as proficient in their duties and served as a measure of progress for the school overall.

Standardized Procedures

While the principles of the inspection outlined why the staff assistance visit format was critical to the logistics school mission, the elements of the inspection dictated how the team accomplished its duties.

Army Regulation 1-201 lists these basic elements of an inspection (or staff assistance visit):

- Measure performance against a standard.
- Determine the magnitude of the problem(s).
- Seek the root cause of the problem(s).
- Determine a solution.
- Assign responsibility to the appropriate individuals or agencies.

Measure performance against a standard. The focus of any inspection must be on measuring compliance against established standards. In garrison operations, units may use published Army guidelines. In an SFA or multinational training scenario, however, which standard to use may be less obvious. Therefore, the need for consensus on an objective standard is an essential task prior to carrying out any inspection.

The host-nation forces naturally did not operate on U.S. Army guidelines and, furthermore, lacked standards for areas such as quality control of instructor curricula, which presented an immediate challenge. The advisory team reached back to the Training and Doctrine Command to obtain standards and guidance based on publications by international sources. The international na-

ture of these standards bridged the gap between the U.S. system and the French/Belgian system that the Congolese military used.

Determine the magnitude of the problem. Determining the relative importance of particular issues required continual and candid conversations with DRC National Logistics School personnel. During this process, the team incorporated the feedback and guidance of the host nation in order to maintain their support of the project. The results of these discussions helped the team prioritize areas in which corrective training could make the most impact on the school's readiness to train logisticians.

Seek the root cause of the problem. While the numerical scores provided a solid marker of progress, they did not explain the reasons why the school was strong or weak in certain areas. As with the previous element, this required in-depth conversations with host-nation forces in order to separate issues that could be resolved at the school level from issues that required higher echelon assistance.

Further investigation uncovered deeper issues in the area of vehicle maintenance. During the inspection, the ILAT identified shortages in maintenance schedules and services as well as safety issues in the vehicle bays. The team verified that the maintenance teams were competent in their fields and further inquiry found that the actual issue was a systematic problem nested within the DRC national supply system and funding sources. This meant that the problem was beyond the capability of the school itself to resolve.

Determine a solution. The focus of determining solutions for identified issues is to ensure that those solutions are successful over the long term. While the team did create measurable progress in areas such as instructor competency and planning schedules through direct training, the more important aspect was helping the host nation create systems that would allow them to perform the tasks themselves.

For system-wide gaps, the team forwarded the concerns to U.S. Army Africa and the Department of State. In this case, the solution came in the form of contracted maintenance assistance while the logistics school's higher echelons worked to resolve the issues internally.

Assign responsibility to the appropriate individuals or agencies. The team took a hybrid approach to assigning responsibility. While the self-assigned instructor training plan did address the weak areas found in evaluations, the team focused on creating an internal team of inspectors that could perform the same tasks and mentor their peers in the process. This laid the foundation for the host-nation military to assume responsibility for training its own personnel and allowed follow-on regionally aligned forces teams to check progress in later rotations.

Shared Understanding

Successful employment of the principles and elements of inspections allows visiting staff sections to create shared understanding among the inspecting and inspected units. This support and agreement on the recommended course of action ultimately benefits the Army as a whole. This tenet also applies to SFA missions.

Within the DRC National Logistics School, the shared understanding eventually came from cross-communication and sharing information among foreign partners and U.S. agencies, each of which had its own goals and procedures.

In general, the team executed its plan when all parties concurred on the recommended courses of action. The key aspect of this was taking the time to build a supportive dialogue not only with host nation forces but also among U.S. elements in the country.

One overarching theme the team noticed while working alongside Department of State representatives was the overlap of information and execution requirements between agencies.



Sgt. 1st Class Terry Jones conducts a demonstration course on maintenance shop safety for cadre of the Democratic Republic of the Congo National Logistics School on June 28, 2017. (Photo by Capt. Denny Luong)

They consolidated all requirements into one reporting format, simplifying the flow of information.

This focus on consolidated reporting also extended to the ILAT's reports to DRC personnel, who received translated but otherwise identical briefings. Upon receiving clearance from the logistics school command, the advisors trained their DRC counterparts using translated documentation and standards. By working side-by-side with host-nation forces in this manner, the team was better able to guide actions and implement the corrective measures previously recommended.

As the Army continues building more SFA brigades, missions like the Lifeliners' mission at the DRC Na-

tional Logistics School will become more commonplace. With the increase in workload comes a pressing need to ensure progression in Army objectives over time.

Inspections and staff assistance visits offer a systematic way to look at foreign units' progression or performance. The end state for a staff assistance visit to an SFA environment, therefore, is the same as a staff assistance visit conducted stateside. Such visits offer an invaluable way to achieve shared understanding among U.S. and partner nations about what the mutual goals should be.

The Lifeliners' mission in the DRC served as a successful case study of a way to accomplish this shared understanding and obtain the support needed to execute the mission. Al-

though it is not the only method, other units could benefit from incorporating the staff assistance visit model into their mission planning.

Capt. Denny Luong is a plans officer in the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) Sustainment Brigade. He holds a bachelor's degree in physics from Texas A&M University and is a graduate of the Combined Logistics Captains Career Course, the Quartermaster Basic Officer Leader Course, and the Air Assault School.

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